

A few notes on literary translation [revised 2016]

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Some basic points and questions, mostly about translating poems.

I.

A common word in one language may signify or connote an idea or feeling that is differently conceived or felt or not so often encountered in another language—for example, the Brazilian Portuguese word “saudade” (a kind of pleurably melancholy longing), or the frequent everyday metaphors of “illumination” or “light” in French—a semantic usage that seems to derive from the intellectual history of France in particular; or in American English, the obsessive and mostly hollow (and frequently commercial) use of the word “revolution,” and the unsurprising but appalling flood of unconsciously used metaphors based on guns and other weapons, in every conceivable social and communicative context—daily conversation, news, advertising: “trigger,” “shoot,” “bomb,” “target,” etc. etc. Translating these from English into another language is an interesting problem: there’s no difficulty in grasping their meaning, but in another society many such metaphors would not be “dead,” they would still have literal value, and it’s precisely the literal meaning of these terms that speakers of American English scarcely ever notice. (See Michael Riffaterre on the individual word as “intertext” and Kwame Anthony Appiah on “Thick Translation” (sources of all the essays I mention are in my blog post of March 1, 2016).

There can be grammatical instances of this problem, too, such as the present perfect tense in English, which as a construction signifies something like “an action begun in the past and continued into the present moment” (“I have

gone to that club many times," "I have never eaten sushi"); this tense may be difficult to comprehend for someone whose native language does not make use of it. (Spanish has the tense and the concept; Italian does not have the concept and it uses a similar conjugation – auxiliary verb plus past participle – to signify an action completed in the past ["I went there many times," implying that "I do not go there any more"]). But are these the kinds of problems that literary translators spend most of their time on? No. But they're interesting.

II.

The acts of writing and translating are textual and contextual (and also intertextual, in that a translation exists only because of the existence of a prior text elsewhere, and sometimes of texts in the target language that have created or will create a context for the translated text.) Sometimes it's because of the gaps between poet and translator--linguistic, literary, cultural and historical, and some of them not quite perceived by the translator-- that translators take different approaches to translating the same text.

Languages differ in what they can say, can't say, may or may not say, and must say or don't need to say (such as the need for a pronoun; Roman Jakobson puts this kind of issue very succinctly). Meanwhile, idioms and idiomatic syntax in two different languages are often very different. Imagine a Chicago social club that includes "artist members"; is this phrase different from "member artists"? What about when in a particular phrase one language *must* specify the gender of a noun, and another cannot? Some languages specify or imply dimensions of time, experience, and action and agency that others do not communicate. This is about linguistics.

What's literary, by contrast, is composed in a context of artistic assumptions, constraints, permissions, and expectations that has been created by earlier works over time – or by particular audiences or dominant critical positions. Also, while in its language of origin a work might be very fresh in manner or statement, that same manner or statement might already be familiar in the target language, which makes it difficult for the translator to convey the original freshness. There is an opposite problem, too: what if a particular manner, familiar and even clichéd in the source language, is unfamiliar or even unprecedented in the target language? Should the translator bring this element into the target language as something very fresh? Or rather find an analogous cliché in the target language? (Does everything depend on figuring out the intentions of the source writer – even though artistic intentions are often nearly impossible to judge?) Should a translator make the translation seem completely idiomatic in the target language, as if it had been composed in the target language originally? (See Schleiermacher and others.) Or rather translate so that the unfamiliar aspects of the source language and text will sound unidiomatic? (This might enlarge the possibilities of poetry in the target language – and this was the justification proposed by Dante Gabriel Rossetti and in another way by Walter Benjamin.)

Or what if an impressive quality of the source text (which could have to do with style, with sound, with the movement of thought, etc.) is already known in the target language but is considered inappropriate or uninteresting or puerile or antiquated in the literary culture of that language? What if an earlier literary strategy or stance – such as High Modernist poetic devices like those of T. S. Eliot, H.D., Ezra Pound, and Mina Loy – is considered antiquated, outmoded, in the source language, but would have the effect of a literary revolution in the target language in the present day?

I vividly remember arriving at a literary party in Mexico City and seeing Octavio Paz speaking with a small group of young men (literary culture was more patriarchal in Mexico than in the U. S., then). As I approached Paz – whom I knew a little – he welcomed me to his circle. “I was just telling them,” he explained to me (in Spanish), “that three of the most influential American poets in all of Latin America were from Illinois. Isn't this true?” That caught me completely flatfooted (a commonplace English-language dead metaphor that might be very difficult to translate well). I was taken aback by the idea that the influence in Latin America of three poets from Illinois could have rivaled Walt Whitman's. “Sandburg,” I said. «¡Sí! » he answered, smiling and waiting. “Masters,” I said. And Paz turned to his group and said to them (in Spanish), “All over Latin America there are poets who are rewriting the *Spoon River Anthology* without even knowing that that is what they are doing.” Then, to me: «¿Y el tercer poeta?» But I could not imagine who this might be. Also, I knew I would see his enjoyment when he triumphantly announced the missing name that I, an American poet, had not supplied. He said, “Vachel Lindsay!” So – three poets no longer at all in vogue in American literary culture were still revelatory (but very belated) innovators to some poets elsewhere. One of the most famous such instances is that of Edgar Allen Poe – whom Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Valéry, and other French poets considered one of the greatest of poets, and whose work had an effect on their own, yet Poe was not regarded in his lifetime or theirs, or in our own day, as a great poet, by readers, poets and critics in the U.S.A.

On the other hand – what if the target language and literature make possible certain effects that are partly limited by the source language itself and its literary traditions? Can translation liberate meanings as often as it loses them? (See James McGuire on Samuel Beckett's poems.) Almost any pairing of languages

offers the writer (and translator) different linguistic openings *and* opportunities, as well as different literary-historical contexts that may be either constraining or liberating in terms of the poetics that are in play in the translating. As I mention several times in my book *How Poems Think*, translating the words isn't enough, not is translating the syntax, or any one poetic element; the great goal is to translate the poetics of the original poem – how it creates meaning, and especially how it *moves* from image to image, line to line, idea to idea, feeling to feeling. Boris Pasternak often moves the poem forward by surprising repetition of word sounds, Marina Tsvetaeva often does it by drawing out of a word – by sound or word-form or some other element that she can transform or that she can invite to lead the poem forward – the word she writes next, and thus she changes the direction of her poem repeatedly. Can one translate that? Sometimes, but the semantic value of the translated word may be lost, while the poetics of the word choice is conveyed, so a reader looking at a translation in order to see whether s/he considers it an adequate decoding will be disappointed or annoyed.

The cultural and historical problems of translation – often embodied in the very linguistics of a poem – can rarely be conveyed clearly in translation, and in the target language and culture may even be scarcely apprehended or thinkable. In the target culture and language, other, quite different historical events and textures of historical experience may dominate, along with other associations, connotations, ideas, behaviors, and what I suppose we could call other feeling-sets of particular groups within cultures. In China, poets were persecuted, decades ago, for writing poems about flowers; their gesture was considered by those who ruled as a coded and criminalized criticism of the communist regime, which insisted that all writers depict idealized lives of workers – which insisted, that is, that poems make certain political gestures and not others. Even a

literarily excellent translation of such poems into English cannot bring us their political gesture, which is entirely ingrained in their historical moment.

And of course there is highly effective “soft” political pressure, too, on art. In the U.S.A., one of the most volatile and contradictory subjects in literature (and even more so in the media) is the political dimension of social class. Two great American poets of both the subtleties and heavy effects of class on working people are now to be found in at least some anthologies but who were long excluded, and remain excluded from many classrooms: Thomas McGrath and Muriel Rukeyser. (Adrienne Rich helped mightily in bringing the latter back into print, and later admired the former as well.) These two, among many others, present interesting problems of context to translators who want to bring them into other languages and literary cultures, other class systems and histories.

To the extent that a poem or a novel is inflected by the present-day mass culture of artificial violence (film, television, video games, advertising), it is readily translatable, because this aspect of culture is so internationalized that it presents no untranslatable cultural difference, one supposes (with a sigh). And while “text” is the most common medium of the transmission of poetry, poetry’s thriving in electronic media is an interesting added layer of mediumization. There’s no question that it affects the reading of poems, and very widely inflects the composition of poems, too, especially of “poetry” that is “born digital.” Will this further weaken the attractiveness of books?

In Spanish, a *book* of poems is called a *poemario*; English has no single word for either the physical object or – what’s more important – the collection of poems seen as a single thing as well as a group of smaller single things. Books are not so dangerous in a social context of electronic media; hence they are not in danger of being actively suppressed – that would be pointless. Yet the experience of reading a *book* of poems can’t help but decline as more and more poetry appears

on the web and the reading of poems becomes, like the reading of everything else, more fragmented because the web invites us to read short works of every kind. How might this cultural change in reading come to have an effect on the translator's *purpose* in translating? (See the essay by Hans Vermeer on "commission" or "skopos.") The purpose might be – as so often when poets translate – to create a version for the sake of the poetics of the translator's own time, whether to alter these (Rosetti) or to fulfill them, as in Christopher Logue's versions (he did not call them translations) of Homer, in which the translator does not even try to suggest a venerable and formally strict text but rather makes use of extreme typographical effects and jarring, highly deliberate (rather than unwitting) anachronisms and sudden shifts of diction in order to emphasize that in certain portions of *The Iliad* there can be both unmistakable ancientness and an uncanny contemporaneity.

A literary translation may be an interpretation of the original or a substitute for it, or a supplement to it, or even an erasure of it (unwitting or witting) or of certain elements in it--as when, for example, the translator knowingly suppresses some element in the original, for his or her own reasons. For example, according to translators Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, the translator Constance Garnett (1861-1946) suppressed unruly elements in the prose of Dostoevsky (1821-1881) and even in the substance of his books, evidently because she did not find them seemly or sufficiently "literary" in terms of her own formation in late Victorian England. Some readers prefer her versions nevertheless; the much more recent versions by Pevear and Volokhonsky explicitly aim at showing those unruly elements, and have been highly praised by some, and roundly condemned by others) Most translators of the Chilean poet Gabriela Mistral (1889-1957) avoided poems that did not match the public image of her as the poet "of women and children" in a sentimental sense; more recent translations show a

feminist Mistral with a more demanding poetic technique, as in the “Madwomen” versions of Randall Couch.

We may feel a desire to recuperate aspects of a translated work that have been neglected or suppressed in previous translations but which we can see because our own era makes those aspects more apparent. (An earlier era's constraints on literary creation can also turn out to have permitted that era's poets – and translators – to make discoveries of a kind we later readers and translators cannot make, and vice versa.) Considering any work that has been translated many times, over the years, can one answer the question, Which is the “best” or “most accurate” translation of all?

At the same time, even the publishers (so few!) most deeply devoted to the publication of books of poems in translation may find it ever harder to recoup the expenses of publishing a *poemario*. While more and more publishing of translated works is wonderfully humane work made possible by the web (as especially on the site wordswithoutborders.org), might it become harder to get a full sense of a poet's work?

While a translator can rarely become the citizen of both worlds – the target world *and* the source world – and feel equally well-informed in both, nevertheless there's at least the possibility of behaving like a citizen of both, in that the translator may recompense some of the violence done to a translated work by trying to elevate the source poem in its own culture simply by publishing it in a respectful way and by other gestures of reparation. (See the essay by Steiner and the discussion of Levinas by Robert Eaglestone.)

The original poem's reception, dissemination, and preservation play a role in constraining or enabling the translator's choices. What did the author's

contemporaries make of the work? Did they know of it? (Think of the audience that did not exist for Emily Dickinson, who chose not to be known out of certainty that readers in the second half of the nineteenth century would not understand her work; or citizens of the Soviet Union, who would certainly have understood Vasily Grossman's great 1959 novel *Life and Fate*, but never knew of it because he was not allowed to publish it.) How did readers understand the work? Was it admired, disliked, well published, suppressed? Do we have an accurate text? What constraints – of technique, of ambition, of ideas, of permitted statements or artistic gestures, and so on – can we detect in the original poem?

Then the translator should also ask: To what audience do I belong? Whereas the poet is writing not only for his or her contemporaries but also with the hope of future readers or readers distant in space and culture, are we translating only for our contemporaries? And for which ones?

We translators cannot keep most of these larger questions in mind as we work; yet becoming more aware of them helps us make all our decisions, even small ones.

III.

Accuracy of translation is an elusive goal, and depends on the nature of the text that is translated, the audience for the translation, and the purposes of the translation. Accuracy of what and to what? Semantic reliability is only one of several different responsibilities of a literary translator, for beyond the semantic value of words (the “representational function” of language), we all know the subtlety with which literary texts, especially poems, make use of highly effective meaning-making devices such as rhythm and meter, the poetic line, the sounds

of words, syntax, tone of voice, poetic structure, allusions (effected with different means) to other literary texts, narrative structure, point of view, even argument, and more.

Naturally, without expertise in reading poetry as a genre, in the language of the original text, and in whatever historical, cultural and specifically literary aspects of the poem may be important, it's impossible to produce an even adequate translation. A translator who doesn't see what the poet is *doing* – beyond what the poet is *saying* – cannot properly perceive what a translation needs to do. (Only very rarely do non-native speakers of the source language have a good command of connotations and faint echoes and idioms, while native speakers of the source language even more rarely have an adequate command of the target language – hence the value of co-translating.)

And there is a lot of information that no dictionary can provide. Words that appear to correspond in two languages so often have distinctly different clouds of connotation, association, usage, allusive value (Riffaterre's "presuppositions"). Linguistic, literary, historical and cultural difference are all the more powerful when they seem only half audible. I remember that in a little crudely printed brochure about a remote mountain monastery that I visited in Spain long ago, the description of the history and appearance of that place was very badly but charmingly mis-translated – straight from a small Spanish/English dictionary, probably: the tiny, crude monks' cells, mostly abandoned, were surrounded by a forest of "high and corpulent pines."

Therefore the translator's command of his or her own language, the target language, is essential, and it too can and must be refined continuously as one progresses through life as a reader, writer and translator. These *linguistic* issues mean that of the two (and usually more) excellent dictionaries that the translator

needs, the one in her or his *own* language should be consulted as often as is the bilingual dictionary. Ideally a third dictionary is at hand – entirely in the source language and containing etymologies (which bilingual dictionaries never do).

In addition, there are *literary* issues: What's the difference between what *poems* are sounding like in the target language in, say, 1909 and 1959 and 2009? (That difference is one of the reasons for making a new translation of a previously translated work – see Ezra Pound on the different “Englishes.”)

The translator has interesting choices to make about poetic form, including the line, the stanza, and on a more detailed level, rhythm, sound, syntax, and so on. Accuracy could mean replicating poetic formats and devices, or not, depending on what is most important in the poem (my long-ago essay on this subject is “Poetic Form and the Translator”). Traditional poem forms like the rhymed sonnet were often the vehicle of avant-garde poets in early twentieth-century movements like *Ultraísmo* in Spain, whereas in English the avant-garde discarded almost entirely such received poetic forms; conversely, in Futurism and Dadaism in several European languages there was considerable (often seriously comic) experiment with meaningless sound arranged in no intelligible, much less traditional, pattern whatsoever; but this practice was scarcely pursued with any enthusiasm in English. French surrealism was rather cerebral, but when surrealism crossed into Spain and sailed to Latin America it grew into much greater emotional intensity; in turn, Spanish and Latin American surrealism (Lorca, Neruda and others) had a far greater effect on American poetry than did French surrealism; thus some translations can change the course of the literary history of the target language (see the essay by Dick Davis on this subject). What might a 2026 translation of an Ultraist sonnet into English look like, as opposed to a 1926 or 1966 translation?