THE TRANSLATOR AS READER

Almost twenty years have elapsed since I finished (or abandoned) *A History of Reading*. At the time, I thought I was exploring the act of reading, the perceived traits of the craft and how these came into being. I didn't know I was in fact affirming our right as readers to pursue our passionate vocation beyond economic, political, and technological concerns, (and today I would add, beyond the threat of a pandemic) in a boundless, imaginative realm where we are not forced to choose and can have it all. Literature is not dogma, it offers questions, not conclusive answers, and the libraries that contain these questions are essentially places of intellectual freedom: any constraints imposed upon them are our own. Reading is, or can be, the open-ended means by which we come to know a little more about the world and about ourselves, not through opposition but through recognition in certain words addressed (we feel) to us individually, from far away, and long ago. In this field, the translator is (or can be) the most refined, most accurate, most knowledgeable performer.

Reading has always been for me a sort of practical cartography. Like other readers, I have an absolute trust in the capability that reading has to map my own world. I know that on a page, somewhere on my shelves, staring down at me now, is the dilemma I'm struggling with today, put into words long ago perhaps, by someone who could not have known of my existence. The relationship between a reader and a book is one that eliminates the barriers of time and space, and allows for what Francisco de Quevedo, in the sixteenth century, called "conversación con los difuntos." In those conversations I'm revealed. They shape me and lend me a certain magical power.

For the longest time, I was unaware of the concept of translation. I was brought up in two languages, English and German, and the passage from one to the other was not, in my childhood, an attempt to convey the same meaning from one language to another through a different set of words, but simply another form of address, depending on whom I was speaking to. A Grimms' fairy tale read in my two different languages became two different fairy tales: the German version, printed in thick Gothic characters and illustrated with gloomy watercolours, told one; the English version in clear, large type, accompanied by black-and-white engravings, told another. Obviously the two were not the same story.

It was only much later, in my adolescence, that I realized that the changing text remains in essence the same. Or rather, that the same text can acquire different identities through different languages, in a process in which every constituent part is discarded and replaced by something else: vocabulary, syntax, grammar, music, as well as cultural, historical and emotional contexts -- or, as Dante puts it in *De vulgari eloquentia*, what changes is, "in the first place, the purpose of the text, in the second place, the disposition of each part in relation to the others, in the third place, the number of lines and syllables."

Readers know that every verbal construction, while simultaneously carrying sense and sound, exists in the time and space of its reading, and also those of its recalling, reading in the library of our memory. But it also exists in its wake, once the words have been said, when only the shadow of sound and sense linger on. In some sense, a translation (a good translation) renders visible that lingering shadow. In 1932, in an essay that compared

various translations of Homer, Jorge Luis Borges suggested that “presuponer que toda recombinación de elementos es obligatoriamente inferior a su original, es presuponer que el borrador [illegible]9 es obligatoriamente inferior al borrador H - ya que no puede haber sino borradores. El concepto de *texto definitivo* no corresponde sino a la religión o al cansancio.” That is to say, every draft of a text has its own epistemological truth because every version of the text must admit change. The painter Bonnard believed in this continuous possibility of change in a work of art. One day, at the Luxembourg Museum, while the guard was momentarily distracted, he quickly got out his palette and retouched one of his paintings that he thought needed correction. Translation, in this sense, is an act of writing that can correct and enrich the original.

We should remember that translation, *translatio* in Latin, is, etymologically, the transporting of something from one place to the other, and has the same meaning as the Greek word *metaphor*. Translation can be understood as a metaphor of the original, the transportation of meaning from one semantic field to another.

In the Middle Ages, *translatio* meant the moving of a saint's relics: translation as displacement, the restoring to a symbol its nomadic nature, the uprooting of something sacred from the site in which it lay and resettling it in another territory, translation as movement, translation as intellectual immigration. Like the carriers of relics, translators strip a text of its customary context and transplant it in the soil of their own language. The new context both transforms and preserves the text.

The *translatio* of holy remains was sometimes a *furta sacra*, the stealing relics for the benefit of one's own society, piracy in the name of patriotism. Famously, in 828, the body of Saint Mark was stolen from Alexandria and taken to Venice under a load of pork meat, which the Muslim border guards refused to touch. Translators, like thieves, appropriate what is not theirs in order to enrich their own linguistic homeland. Thus Venice (which was to become centuries later the translation centre of Europe) was enriched with its symbol.

When I chose to examine the question of the translator as reader in *A History of Reading*, I decided to use the example of Rilke translating the poems of Louise Labé. I myself have been fortunate in my translators. When the book was translated into Spanish, the first version, published in Spain, was by the experienced translator José Luis López Muñoz, a version I consider excellent but slightly foreign to my ear. My Spanish, learnt when I was eight, is Argentinian Spanish. López Muñoz is a native of Spain, and he and I say things differently in our two versions of the language. The second of my translators, the equally accomplished translator Eduardo Hojman, was, like myself, born in Buenos Aires, and in his rendering of my book I hear my own cadences and terms. There is not only a difference in the preferred vocabulary of my two translators, but also in the syntax and the conventions of literary style. Let me give you a small example:

In my chapter on translation, I quote Rilke's rendering of one of Labé's verses, "*Bien je mourrais, plus que vivante, heureuse*." Rilke writes: "*Und der Tot war sicher/ Noch süßer als das Dasein, seliglicher."* In my book, I stop for a moment to reflect on Rilke's word, *seliglicher*, which

enriches in such as astounding manner the simple, even anodyne term used by Labé, *heureuse*.

My two translators render Rilke's term differently. In my original English version of *A History of Reading*, I note that "*Seele* is "soul"; *selig* means "blessed" but also "overjoyed", "blissful." The augmentative, *-icher*, allows the soulful word to trip gently off the tongue four times before ending. It seems to extend that blessed joy given by the lover's kiss; it remains, like the kiss, in the mouth until the *–er* exhales it back onto the lips."

Both Eduardo Hojman and López Muñoz translate Rilke's magical ending with exactly the same words, whether coincidence or happy discovery of the *mots justes* I don't know:

"[Y] la muerte era sin duda/ Más dulce que la vida, incluso más bendita."

But when it comes to Labé's French original, the word *heureuse* appears in López Muñoz's rendering *dichosa* (close to Labé's refined, literary term) and in Hojman's version it becomes a simple *feliz* (closer to the deliberate ordinariness carried by *heureuse*.) Obviously, there is no correct version, because both the artifice and the common touch are present in Labé's chosen word.

I decided to use Rilke and Labé as examples in my book; I could have chosen others.

One that very nearly ended up in my book was the scene in Goethe's *Faust* in which the venerable doctor decides to translate the Gospel of John to see if he understands it. He says that, in order to overcome the frustration he feels at "not knowing," he will turn to "*das Überirdische*" "the underlying meaning" that nowhere shines with more worth and beauty, says Faust, than in the New Testament. To understand its meaning, he continues, he will try to translate it. (And I'm conscious of the irony of discussing a German text on the subject of translation, in translation into English!)

The crux of the scene is the moment when Faust tries to grasp the meaning of the term **Wort,** as Luther translated **Logos** from the ancient Greek, a term normally translated into English as **Word**. Faust says:

"It's written here: 'In the Beginning was the **Word**!'
Here I stick already! Who can help me? It's absurd,
Impossible, for me to rate the word so highly
I must try to say it differently
If I'm truly inspired by the Spirit. I find
I've written here: 'In the Beginning was the **Mind [Sinn]**'.
Let me consider that first sentence,
So my pen won't run on in advance!
Is it Mind that works and creates what's ours?
It should say: 'In the beginning was the **Power [Kraft]**!'
Yet even while I write the words down,
I'm warned: I'm no closer with these I've found.
The Spirit helps me! I have it now, intact.
And firmly write: 'In the Beginning was the **Act [Tat]!**'

All these three senses (and more, certainly) exist in the term **Logos** which is given 13 near-quarto pages in two-columns. So how can a translator, even a scholarly translator such a Dr Faust, succeed? Faust does what he can in proposing three different "drafts" for the text, each laying the stress on a particular quality, but none encompassing all. Perhaps Luther was closest to success in his choice of **Wort** for **Logos**, thus avoiding any narrow connotation and opting for a pluri-semantic validity.

Maimonides, in letter written in 1175 to his translator and disciple Samuel ibn Tibbon, recommended the following strategy: "The translator who proposes to render each word literally and adhere slavishly to the order of the words and sentences in the original, will meet much difficulty and the result will be doubtful and corrupt. This is not the right method. The translator should first try to grasp the sense of the subject thoroughly, and then state the theme with perfect clarity in the other language. This, however, cannot be done without changing the order of the words, putting many words for one word, or vice versa, and adding or taking away words, so that the subject be perfectly intelligible in the language into which he translates."

This is the key Luther (and Faust) are looking for: that "the subject be perfectly intelligible in the language into which he translates."

There is a celebrated debate between Vladimir Nabokov and his then friend Edmund Wilson about opposing methods of translation. Nabokov had translated Pushkin's masterpiece *Eugene Onegin* from the Russian into English, attempting to preserve all the features, even physical and syntactical features, or the original. Two of the main challenges of translating poetry are

the question of rhyme (if the original is in rhyme) and the question of form (Dante's *terza rima*, for example, or what is known as the "Onegin stanza") The "Onegin stanza" is a complicated14-line paragraph-like section in iambic tetrameters invented by Pushkin. It consists of three quatrains, each with a different rhyming scheme, and ending with a rhyming couplet. The difficulties of carrying this into another language are immense, but in 1945 Nabokov managed to translate three of Pushkin's stanzas into brilliant and accurate English, respecting Onegin's poetical form. However, twenty years later, trying his hand at a complete translation of Onegin's verse-novel, Nabokov changed his method. He retained some of the rhythm but almost none of the rhyme, and his English (this is extraordinary in a writer as stylish as Nabokov) became "ugly and ungrammatical", as an angry Wilson pointed out. As the Harvard Russian scholar Alexander Gerschenkron, said: "Nabokov's translation can and should be studied, but it cannot be read."

At its best, a translation can be as excellent or even better than the original. The many translations of any single text grant that text something like the miracle of Pentecost, allowing readers the possibility of hearing the original words spoken each in a different tongue. Unlike my early intuition of utterly distinct entities, every translation is very much the same text, but the text questioned, re-examined, doubted, amplified, revised, moved into a different context, commented upon, brought up to date and changed as the tongues of flame changed the speech and thought of each of the twelve apostles. In this endless cumulative process, an infinity of translators might approach something like the perfect, definitive, archetypal text, fulfilling in its congress all its aesthetic possibilities and making explicit all its nuances of emotion and meaning. A group of gifted translators would simply need eternity to fulfill the task.

Paul Valéry (and Shelley as well) imagined that all poems are part of an unfinished universal poem. More modestly, the original of any text, together with its translations, can be read as a single stanza of that poem, which, like the entire inconceivable whole, is still in the process of being written. Magically, we readers have been granted the privilege to be present at the creation of at least a page.

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