

Translation's Teaching Moment

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The general membership meeting of the American Literary Translators Association's annual conference in October of this year went smoothly until the final item of business. The members present were sharply divided over the newly imposed rule stipulating that only books with the translator's name printed on the cover should be eligible for the National Translation Award, which is administered by that organization. The rationale for the new rule is clear enough—publishers should pay more attention, and encourage readers to pay more attention, to the fact of translation; and translators should be better recognized and acknowledged for their work. A familiar story. Requiring that only books with translators' names on their covers be eligible for the annual award was seen, by some ALTA members at least, as a form of slightly righteous pressure applied to the gatekeepers of publishing.

The problem was that the new rule had resulted in a marked decrease, by more than half from previous years, in the number of eligible applications. It appears that quite a few translations continue to be published without translators' names going on their covers. Members argued over whether to stick to the rule—and the principle behind it—or bow before the practical realities that (1) many publishers do not put translators' names on the outsides of books (and some make them almost un-traceable on the insides as well); (2) translators are not to blame for the fact that they have little or no power to force publishers to do so, which makes preventing them from entering their works for the award a rather unfair constraint; and (3) ALTA's prize is not prestigious or noteworthy enough to put appropriate pressure, righteous or otherwise, on publishers to change the way they do business.

Business presumably is the main reason that large, commercial publishers are reluctant to follow the desired path. An assumption on their part remains palpable that readers will at least hesitate if not turn resolutely away when confronted by the fact of a translated work, especially one by a relatively unknown author, relatively unknown translator, or both. They tend to see the highlighting of translation as an unnecessary and potentially harmful gesture—harmful to their own business interests, yes, but also harmful to the book, the author, the translator, and, in some cases, serious literature in general. If the book doesn't get into people's hands, after all, it doesn't help anyone; and in the highly competitive book market, where each new title is thought of as pushing another title off the shelf, an obviously translated work is less likely to be successful. Better to slip in the translation part, they suggest, without overt notice, or at

least without slapping the reader in the face with the information. Let it perform whatever cross-cultural or other magic it might be capable of performing, but quietly, unobtrusively. Otherwise, you risk turning readers off, or at least encouraging them to make other choices from among the many they have. This is in assumption based not, to my knowledge, on any empirical evidence, but rather on a combination of anecdote, publisher's lore, and gut feeling.

On the other hand stand those translators, like some of the most vociferous at the ALTA general meeting, who say that literature and translation have always gone hand in hand and always will; and that Americans are too insular as it is without having publishers shield them from the fact that there are great works in English that weren't originally written in English; and that this kind of action on the part of publishers is motivated by sheer ignorance, the shameful monolingualism of editors, or the undue influence of obtuse marketers who've never set foot out of New York City, let alone the U.S. of A. Would we have American readers think like Ma Ferguson, a former governor of Texas, who, when faced with the specter of allowing Spanish to be taught in the public schools, supposedly once said, "If English was good enough for Jesus, it's good enough for the children of Texas"? These translators, then, insist that we should do something that's within our power, or close to it, and remind people of the fact of translation every chance we get, and of the considerable role that translators play in the creation of literature, openly acknowledging that work and the expertise, skill, and art that translators bring to it.

They are speaking at cross purposes in most of this, of course, the publishers nervous about sales and the potential effect of complicating the message, the translators angry and sensitive about not being taken seriously. It would help a lot to have some good survey data that might help answer the basic question behind the publishers' assumption: are readers really less likely to pick up a translated book in a bookstore when they can clearly see that it's been translated? No one really knows. I hope that some budding translation studies scholar will take on the very important work of providing an answer that's based on more than what I have to offer here.

This audience may not be pleased to hear it, but I tend to agree with the publishers in this instance at least, partly because the retail sales market is really no place to be teaching people anything but in the most subtle of ways. Mainly, though, I think this because of a look I've seen on people's faces, the faces of students, colleagues, and administrators in academic settings, and those of friends, neighbors, and family outside them. I would characterize the look as a reflection of a slight insecurity with shades of bewilderment whenever I speak about the fact of translation, its invisible pervasiveness. There may be a little guilt in it too, for not having studied their Spanish or German lessons more diligently when they were in school, or something like that, I'm not sure. But I've seen the look many times and am no longer really surprised by it. My conclusion is that translations do tend to make many people nervous, and that publishers' lore has something to do with that score.

It's not a reason to give up the fight, or accept an unreflective invisibility. On the contrary, I see it as a provocation to expand the battlefield. Some translation scholars see the question of placing or not placing translators' names on the covers of books as a sort of teaching moment for the general reading public, envisioned as myriad Ma Fergusons willfully ignoring the fact that Jesus didn't speak, nor Tolstoy nor Dante write, in English. It may be such a moment, but even so it is a terribly minor one, misplaced, I would argue, in the retail bookstore, and in any case unlikely to have much consequence when pursued in isolation. The relative neglect of translation in university teaching is the larger and much more fecund teaching territory I would like to focus on, by suggesting two key domains in which engaging translations—reading them and writing them—can serve a fundamentally transformative role in people's reading practices both inside and outside the classroom.

Identifying people's insecurity about translation (that look on their faces) with their relative ignorance of foreign languages—an interpretive move many of my foreign language colleagues tend to make—is, I am convinced, a mistake. Being accepting of translated works, if not comfortable with them, is at least as dependent on culture as it is generative of a kind of knowledge. What kind of knowledge I will get to in a moment, but consider the fact that translated literature from many different languages is highly regarded and widely read in Japan, one of the most monolingual societies in the world. Or think of the likely reception to putting translators names on the cover of the Bible—The Bible, by God, translated by Mary and Bob Thomas. In both such cases, the culture of the readership is a centrally important factor in relating to the fact of translation, at least as important as knowing any foreign language.

But there is something about the dominant foreign language teaching models of the last approximately thirty years in the U.S. that is an important factor in the current relative resistance to translation in the undergraduate curriculum. We are approximately one generation downwind of the great sea change in foreign language pedagogy ushered in by the communicative method and standards of oral proficiency in the 1980s. That methodological framework positioned itself by contrast to a variety of other methods, perhaps none more polemically than that known as “grammar/translation.” Indeed, grammar/translation came to be an object of especial scorn for the early apologists of the new science of second language acquisition (SLA). Those who had adhered to grammar/translation were often denigrated as unsystematic, ineffective teachers who—I heard this critique on more than one occasion—actually didn't speak the languages they taught very well anyway. They were hiding their lack of fluency, so the criticism went, behind grammar rules and rote translation drills that did little but take up valuable class time. The use of translation in foreign language teaching was equated, then, with ineffective methodology used by poor speakers.

The rather consistent bias, in proficiency models of foreign language instruction, towards fluent speaking was especially evident in this early stage, and others have commented upon it. What I would like to emphasize is SLA's methodological privileging not of speech per se, but

of expressivity as a category of language experience, language life. The very definition of proficiency in most SLA models, which some people still like to call fluency, betrays such a bias. In the standard oral proficiency test, a speaker is provided with a situation in which she or he is unlikely to know all the specific words that might pertain to that situation. For example, you are getting a haircut and you want to tell the stylist that you would like to shorten the bangs and thin the hair at the temples. Not knowing the words for “bangs,” “temples,” and “to thin” is figured into the problem, the solution to which is measured by how well you are able to maneuver around your ignorance, that is, circumlocute. The thought here presumably is that this is something native speakers do all the time, in the many situations when they do not know the exact or technical vocabulary. It constitutes a meta-speech strategy of sorts that, when combined with a variety of language rudiments, enables superior speakers to communicate in just about any situation.

This is perhaps the smartest global strategy for foreign language teaching that has ever been devised. It is flexible and testable. When you explain it to university administrators, moreover, they see very quickly its virtues, especially when one stipulates the specific skills that an intermediate mid-level language user is supposed to be able to exhibit, in an exit interview, for instance. I will not speak about the considerable degree to which the entire enterprise of foreign language instruction approached in this manner alienates all those who like to emphasize literature and ideas in their teaching, though that is an important matter in the current, fragmented foreign language and literature environment. Instead, I would like to suggest the fundamental opposition between an expressivity-based approach such as what I have described, where the goal most often is to say what one wants, and a potentially translation-based approach, where accuracy of comprehension and expression in writing *of someone else's* thoughts and desires would be the primary emphasis.

What this might mean in practice is that, in a translation-oriented approach, one would pay closer attention to what other people were saying and writing and, if one did not know the words, one would have to find them out, not find a way around them. In translation, circumlocution is almost never an option. By marginalizing translation from the language learning process, I wonder if we might be depriving learners of an essentially empathic linguistic practice, like training musicians by focusing on the solo. I will come back to this.

The second key academic domain from which translation has been marginalized is the teaching of literature. There we are not one but two, or two and a half, generations downwind of the great transformation, in this case the new critical and formalist transformations of interpreting literature in university classrooms. New Critics and Formalists both understood what it meant to engage translated literature because translated literature was an institutional norm of their own educations. But the degree to which their privileging of the text and, more importantly, the manner in which their ideas became institutionalized, by their students and their students' students, in the teaching of literature in U.S. post-secondary education, tended

to exclude from an ideal textual analysis virtually all the questions that translators would normally grapple with—how a work was perceived by its original audience, how one’s own potential rendering of it might match or not match the literary conventions of a target audience, what might be the cultural, political, or social need to translate the work, and a host of other extra-textual considerations.

The bias here is not towards expressivity but towards invention, and the model of writing envisioned is one that marshals a plethora of words largely external to a text and launches them at it. How else could you possibly get a 500-page dissertation out of 100-page novella? Choose your own example. Apprentices to the method in Freshmen intro to interpretation courses are routinely encouraged to quote from a work but then “do things” with the quoted material, shape it amid their own argument, control it as part of their own critical explication. The exploration of the text takes place by means of a critical reflective apparatus that should ideally maintain its distance, not engage in a naïve, uncritical identification with characters, for instance, or any of the other typically unsophisticated reading practices of readers who don’t know any better. The high Modernist bias in this approach should be evident, and I am not going to dwell on it.

Contrast it instead to a method of teaching literature that would rely upon translation, not rote exercises as used to be employed by the generation of language teachers I mentioned earlier, but serious literary translation, of a variety of genres, from works of a variety of historical periods, in the creation of English-language literature that might actually find its way to readers. What would it take to put such a method into practice? What would students of such a method need in order to practice it successfully?

They would have to have a solid grasp of a source language, its grammar and syntax, its sound possibilities, regionalisms, slang, and idioms—all from the period in which the source texts were written. They would need to have a thorough understanding of the genres of the work, their histories and variations, and the poetics of the periods in question, as well as closely neighboring genres—is this lampoon or parody? They would need to be able to identify literary, cultural, and historical allusions in a source text, which means they would have to have a sense of the author’s range of knowledge and experience, too. Then they would need to know at least as much or more about the language tradition into which they were translating—its poetics and genres and sound possibilities and so on, in order best to engage an audience in that language. They would have to have a sense of rhetoric, of how to position themselves vis-à-vis their author; they would have to be able to write good dialogue, and differentiate one voice from another; and discriminate among words of different registers, find metaphors, sayings appropriate to language users of different ages and cultures, a 20-year-old homeless man in a coastal resort, a 60-year-old widow on an inland farm. And they would have to recall, in the midst of doing all this, that the words they were using were not merely an expression of what they might want, or their own thoughts, at least not entirely their own.

To me this little—perhaps utopian—exercise suggests an obvious, large, and enormously important place for translation in the undergraduate curriculum of the future: in the teaching of foreign languages and the teaching of literature, history, and culture, not as a mere throw back to the way things might have been done in the past, but as a nexus between the institutions of foreign language and literature programs on one hand and English and creative writing programs on the other. That, I think, is its true teaching moment.