Notes on Fidelity in Translation

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Some translations are said to be more "faithful" than others. In reality, all translations are roughly faithful to some principle or other, or usually several at once. In most translation theory, the choices of translation are often plotted along two axes of fidelity: to language (literal translation) and to meaning (liberal translation). In literal translation, the foreignness of the original language can be preserved, with its strange locutions and peculiar vocabulary. Meaning may be so obscured that the translator is compelled to provide explanatory footnotes that help bridge the gap between the writer's world and the reader's world. In liberal translation, the author's meaning, as well as it may be determined by the translator, is made clear and familiar in the context of the reader's world. The characteristic flavor of the original language, and of the original writer's idiolect, may be sacrificed in the effort to make a literary work speak to a reader as directly as possible.

I say "roughly faithful" above because, though a translator may have a tendency toward either literal or liberal translation, translation is in reality a series of compromises between these and other principles including questions of aesthetics, contemporary taste, and rhetorical purpose. A translator juggles so many concerns that it's a miracle translations emerge at all, much less translations that satisfy the audiences for which they are intended. I put my faith in a process that starts with a very close literal translation, then backs out for a look at the whole work and its possible meanings, and then proceeds by means of a repeated cycle of negotiations, concessions, retreats, surrenders, and (if I'm lucky) small victories until a tolerable new poem has been written that doesn't appear to disrespect or deform the original too egregiously. I'll

illustrate what I mean with a specific poem after a short digression into some theoretical perspectives on what we do as translators.

Translation in Theory

Edward Seidensticker uses the pronouncements of Lord Woodhouselee (1791) to define the familiar dilemma of the translator (Seidensticker 143):

- Should we be true to the original, trying to capture the peculiar flavor of the foreign language? "The style and manner in a Translation should be of the same character with that of the Original."
- Or should we try to create a good piece of art in our own language? "A Translation should have all the ease of original composition."

To illustrate the difficulty of negotiating the two poles, he sketches differences, grammatical and cultural, between Japanese and English. More information is carried in Japanese than in English by the verb (and its adverbs), which is placed at or near the end of most sentences, making us wait for a long time to find out whether the action is (for example) past or future, indicative or conditional, emphatic or tentative. He also explains how Japanese changed when it absorbed more Chinese, especially its nouns, after Lady Murasaki's time (about 1200), and how poorly the new words (like later English borrow words) fit into Japanese: "Chinese nouns are stubbornly self-reliant and will take part in a sentence only with the greatest reluctance." How do we communicate such subtleties in a translation? Lord Woodhouselee's admonitions are no help.

Michael Riffaterre may offer a partial solution by emphasizing how specifically *literary* language carries meaning. He asserts that literary language is different from "nonliterary uses of language" in:

- "the semioticization of discursive features" (i.e., aesthetic features can carry meaning)

- "the substitution of semiosis for mimesis" (i.e., meaning is imparted not simply by relating words to their corollaries in "the real world" but also by drawing attention to the function of language itself and its relation to "the real world")

- "intertextuality" (i.e., language that recalls other language) in which "the discrete meanings of the words, phases, and sentences composing the text assume new functions in its general scheme"

Literary language, then, must be "read" at many levels beyond the mimetic in order to explore all the possibilities, some only implied, of meaning in a text.

Literary translation must operate on these assumptions about the nature of literary language; it should:

- "semioticize forms and sounds like the original"

- "render both meaning and significance," imparting not only information about "the world" but also about the ways the translation is functioning through a "double decoding" of the original text that encourages a "double decoding" on the part of the reader; it makes clear, in other words, that the text "is an artifact rather than a plain representation of reality" and it draws attention to its *representative* nature

- communicate the same "presuppositions" as the original text (presuppositions such as a genre or an "indirection of meaning" such as figurativeness); "No literary translation . . .

can every be successful unless it finds equivalencies for these literariness-inducing presuppositions."

A literary translation must capture as well as it can the ways in which literature hints, guesses, and plays with meaning beyond the mimetic. Riffaterre's conclusion says it well: "Perhaps the simplest way to state the difference between literary and non-literary translation is to say that the latter translates what is in the text, whereas the former must translate what the text only implies" (217). Word-for-word translations don't work because they don't "transpose presuppositions" by "shifting the burden of presupposing to another segment of the text," especially from "lexeme" to "syntagm" (or vice versa): to communicate, for example, the meaning of a word in the original language through manipulation of a translation language's syntactical possibilities (or vice versa).

Both Seidensticker and Riffaterre help us understand how different languages carry and deliver information in different ways, with different characteristic grammatical preferences, and how we must both sustain the meaning of the original text and also exploit the possibilities of the translation language to communicate it. At the same time, even if we suppose we can solve all the difficulties of language, or at least bracket them for a moment, we are still left with the extra-linguistic problem of translating meaning between disparate material and cultural worlds. Borges notes the near impossibility of fidelity in this effort, especially in the case of texts from very remote times and places, such as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*; of the various versions he examines, he asks, "Which of these many translations is faithful? my reader will want to know. I repeat: none of them or all of them. If fidelity refers to Homer's *imaginations* and the irrecoverable men and days that he portrayed, none of them are faithful for us, but all of them would be for a tenth-century Greek" (62-63, my emphasis).

Borges does go on to say, however: "If [fidelity] refers to [Homer's] *intentions*, then any of the many I have transcribed would suffice" (63, my emphasis). If, any other words, we can't recreate a text in a different language and a different material and cultural context altogether that is identical in meaning to the original in the world it evokes, we can at least honor, in our own context, what the original author tried to say, as well as we understand it.

Translation in Practice

I translate the contemporary Catalan poet Ponç Pons. Catalan is a Romance language distinct from Spanish (or as Catalan speakers prefer to call that language, Castilian), with many features in common with French and Italian. Suppressed for decades during the dictatorship of Franco along with other minority languages in Spain, Catalan is now enjoying a resurgence among its six million speakers, but Catalan-English dictionaries and grammars are still inadequate to the task of literary translation, even when supplemented by open-source on-line dictionaries and verb conjugators. Further complicating the translator's task, Pons also uses elements of a dialect of Catalan, *menorquí*, spoken on his native island of Menorca. I am what is known in language learning jargon as a "heritage speaker" of Catalan, a speaker who has relearned a language that died out in my family across the centuries since my ancestors emigrated from Menorca.

In addition to these difficulties, there is also the struggle to "transpose presuppositions" between a Romance language (with its implied grammatical subjects, its litanies of modifiers both before and after nouns, its loose word order, its cavalier use of the parts of speech—with nouns serving as adjectives, adjectives as adverbs) and English (with its almost martial word

order, its unambiguous parts of speech, its always-identified grammatical subjects, its generally

parsimonious use of modifiers). I found myself, in some of the compromises I made, sacrificing

the feel of Catalan—its rhythm, its flow of lexical information, its liberated syntax—to

communicate what I hoped was the author's intent to my reader.

I wanted to translate it because it seems important to Pons, appearing on several websites

devoted to him, recited by him in a short film available on the internet ("Ponç Pons"), and

translated by at least one other poet (Pons). In fact, if it hadn't been such a prominent and

necessary poem, I might have abandoned it, as its difficulties proved daunting.

Here is the original Catalan poem:

Calçobre

Perquè escriure és també donar un sentit al món

I salvar del neguit un temps mortal absurd

Persever en la nit tot cercant fervent mots

Que emotius m'apuntalin fets versos la vida

The problems begin with the very title. "Calçobre" refers to crumbs of limestone that flake from

the whitewashed walls that are ubiquitous on the sun-bleached Mediterranean island of Menorca,

a word with no equivalent in the English language and a concept with no equivalent in the

English-speaking world. Other words demand choices among possible translation options. Is

"sentit" to become the cognate "sense" (including its meaning of "consciousness") or the Anglo-

Saxon "meaning"? Will "neguit" become the mild "displeasure," the slightly more agitated

"concern," or the vaguely French "uneasiness"? What to do with the metaphorical "apuntalar,"

literally "to underpin," "to gird," "to buttress"? There's the typically Catalan (and Spanish, and Italian, and French) juxtaposition of adjectives (a time that is "mortal absurd") impossible in English, or at least very foreign to English. And then there's the final line, which translates literally, "That/how moving underpin me made verses the life." What meaning is intended by this collection of words? How can it be made into meaningful English?

In view of these difficulties, I admire the efforts of the translator of an on-line version of the poem, who tries a literal approach:

Chalk Debris

Because writing is also giving some sense to the world

And saving from disquiet a time that is mortal and absurd

I persevere in the night fervently seeking words

That with emotion will sustain me when life is made verses

I don't believe, though, that "chalk debris" works at all. In the English-speaking world, "chalk" is a different object from the limestone that Menorcan walls are made of, and "chalk debris" evokes for us perhaps something in the tray of a classroom blackboard. In view of other clues in the poem—the poet's fervent perseverance in the night, the life-saving quality of the verses he writes—I think the mild "disquiet" is the wrong choice. I can't fault her choices for the last, almost untranslatable line; mine are perhaps no more "faithful" to the range of possible meanings, though I do prefer them for a number of reasons. Grammatically, even following the translator's own logic, it is the "mots" (words) that are "emotius" (emotional); "fets" (made or

made of) is not a verb but a verbal adjective describing "versos" (verses); and all this adds up to a grammatical arrangement that doesn't really imply "life is made of verses."

Presented with the same problems, I found other solutions, obeying Riffaterre's injunction to "transpose presuppositions" by communicating what struck me as the intended message concerning the relationship between poetry and life, between the poet and his poems. I also wanted to capture what I experienced as the strong emotion of the original, where poetry doesn't just "save" but "rescues," and not from "disquiet" but from "anguish," and where the poet doesn't simply "seek" but is (taking a hint from "fervent") "consumed with the pursuit."

My version:

Shards

Because to write is also to give meaning to the world

To rescue from anguish a brief, absurd mortality

And persevere in the night, eager, consumed with the pursuit of words—

How they feed me, these moving verses made life!

For the title, since the concept of "calçobre," even if explained with a footnote, would evoke nothing of the meaning it has for Menorcans, I found a word that creates a concrete image familiar to English speakers, another man-made object in decay that may invoke some of the nostalgia or melancholy of "calçobre." Also at the level of word choice, I preferred "meaning" to "sense" in this poem about language, and to preserve the concreteness of "apuntalar," I chose "feed" over abstract verbs like "sustain." The first line was unproblematic and mine is similar to the on-line translation, but in lines two and three I rearranged vocabulary and changed the

grammatical categories of several words to approximate more idiomatic English. For example, instead of the previous translator's literal, "And saving from disquiet a time that is mortal and absurd," I preferred, "To rescue from anguish a brief, absurd mortality." For the difficult last line, I chose not to interpret the first word, "que," as a relative pronoun connecting "words" to "emotion," but rather as the opening of an emphatic exclamation, as in "Que bonic" ("How nice!") or "Que maco!" ("How cool!"). Having made that decision, I also decided that the only plural noun in the last line, "versos," was the object of the plural adjectives "emotius" and "fets," and that the ambiguous relationship between this constellation of word-meanings and the last words in the line ("la vida") allow for the idea that the poet's verses were not so much made *of* life as they were made *into* life, were for him the stuff of life itself.

Though the language issues I've sketched here have bedeviled me in all the translations I've done from contemporary Catalan, the problem that concerns me the most, and has proved most insoluble, is the necessity of connecting Pons's sun-splashed, watery, ancient, rural, intensely-felt Mediterranean world with the cool, subdued, northern, urban, eternally new world of my readers. In Pons's poetry, the poet roams unkempt fields and sleeps on beaches; nature speaks in the voices of birds, trees, the ocean; sirens swim in the harbor while fauns and unicorns leave footprints in the forest; ancient writers and mythical wanderers make cameos; nearly every major European poet of the last century weighs in; and even in the poet's own bedroom, stars pay visits and the ocean splashes. Explanatory footnotes no doubt express my misgivings about accomplishing the task of making this world vivid to my readers.

Am I a faithful translator? As Borges might answer, I am and I'm not. I am not a literal translator, or rather, where I am most literal, I think I am at my least successful. Where I have confidence in my understanding of the poet's intended meaning and emotion, I am perhaps less

literal in one sense, but in another more faithful to the poet's purpose for writing in the first

place.

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