# TRANSLATION REVIEW
## No. 62, 2001
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The events of September 11, 2001, have changed the ways we look at the world. It is the first time in the history of the United States that a major catastrophe has happened on American soil. Thus, we are confronted with problems that don’t seem to have an immediate solution, and dark clouds of fear have penetrated our thoughts and feelings.

On the one hand, we are witnessing the disastrous consequences of the destructive ingenuity of individuals spread all over the globe; on the other hand, we are experiencing a violent clash of languages and cultures that forces us to rethink our attitudes toward the world view of other nations, and therefore we must find ways to navigate through the diverse landscapes of languages and cultures, if the world is to have a chance to survive into the next century.

In times of violent disruptions in the communication between cultures, our attention should immediately be focused on the translator as the most important mediator in a global world. Yet, there are very few signs that the consciousness of the media has been raised with respect to the essential role that translation and translation thinking must play in our contemporary society. Newspaper editors continue to decrease the number of reviews that deal with works translated from foreign languages and are reluctant to dedicate space to topics that could further the understanding of foreign cultures seen through the eyes of the translator, and publishers shy away from publishing translations, because a translated work greatly increases the production price of a book.

However, translators are the most qualified persons to build bridges between languages and cultures. By the very nature of the translators’ training, they live with one foot in their native language and with the other in the foreign language, and therefore they can articulate the differences that exist between cultures. Above all, the translator starts with a sense of openness and curiosity. The essential question must be: what is there that is different in the other culture and how can I, the translator, illuminate that difference and transfer it into the possibilities of a new language? At all times, the translator will avoid a somewhat unconscious attitude of assuming that people in other cultures react the same way we do. They don’t, and most inhabitants of other nations resent it when ideas and opinions are being imposed on them in total disregard of their own traditions and habits. Translators change our perspective toward the “other” in foreign countries. They constantly make an effort to enter into the sensibility of people living in other cultures. They come without prejudices and open themselves to the foreign. They embrace what is new and strange, and they try to bring their new insights back to their own country to enrich their daily lives. The translator becomes the master of communication by building linkages between people who walk in different languages and therefore interpret the world in different ways. The translator’s greatest contribution to furthering interaction and understanding of people from diverse languages is the ability to initiate and cultivate dialogue. By its very nature, dialogue creates understanding, and understanding reduces fear.

The American Literary Translators Association (ALTA) is entering its 25th year of existence. Throughout the years, the members of this organization, independent as well as academic translators, have built a community of translators who come together once a year to discuss all aspects of the creative and critical process of literary translations. During the year, the ALTA members continue their dialogue through the publication of the ALTA Newsletter, and to a certain extent, through the publication of Translation Review. Outside of the annual meeting, however, there is no place in the United States that translators could consider their orientation point. If we look around in the structure of our
intellectual environment, we find that there are all kinds of centers and think tanks that dedicate their efforts to solving political, social, and scientific scientific problems, to mention only a few. Nothing similar exists for translators. Outside of a few centers at universities, no central “research center” has been called into life.

In view of the extreme importance of the translator as the most qualified mediator between people of different languages, we should focus our attention on the creation of a national independent center or think tank for translation. The blueprint for such an institution would include residencies for translators and writers, extended library research facilities, spaces for the performance of dramatic works in translation, fellowships for translators and scholars of translation to investigate specific topics and problems of translation, workshops for translators, facilities for collaboration of translators and their respective authors, meetings of national and international translator’s associations and organizations, and a database of foreign authors translated in book, journal, and anthology format—a clearing house for all matters related to the practice and theory of translation. Very little is known about how translators work, how a translator proceeds from the first draft to the final version. Assisted by the possibilities of the electronic age, such a center could also become the depository of the working processes of translators. All changes that a translator makes during the preparation of a translation could be electronically recorded and thus made available to future translators, especially beginning translators. Such a database could become an invaluable resource to study the process of translation and how translators have reflected their interpretive perspectives of foreign cultures through the craft of translation.

If, for a moment, we compare the situation of the writer with that of the translator, a conspicuous difference emerges. We have established many centers or retreats where poets and writers can work uninterrupted on their respective manuscripts. Institutions like the “Poet’s House” in New York City have contributed greatly to the presence and visibility of poets and their works in this country. Nothing of this sort exists for translators in the United States. Other countries have been more progressive in that realm. One institution that immediately comes to mind is the Europäisches Übersetzerkollegium in Straelen, Germany. I was present at the founding of this Translators College in 1978 and am still a member of its board. Today, Straelen offers translators short- and long-term residencies together with a comfortable living environment and a well-developed resource library. The publication of numerous translations both into German and from German has been made possible through the facilities in Straelen.

The year 1978 was also the founding year of the American Literary Translators Association. The organization has certainly increased the visibility of the translator in the United States. The various activities of ALTA are now in place and are being cultivated from year to year. However, the time is now ripe for translators to take the next step by creating a national center for translation that will serve as a think tank for the promotion of intercultural communication. For an understanding of foreign cultures to be successful, an interdisciplinary research team of translators, writers, critics, and scholars has to be called to life in order to study the complex structures that different civilizations have created through the possibilities of their respective languages. In this context, it is appropriate to repeat Octavio Paz’s words: each language is a way of interpreting the world.
INTERVIEW WITH MABEL LEE: TRANSLATING NOBEL PRIZE WINNER GAO XINGJIAN’S SOUL MOUNTAIN

By Lily Liu

The following is the edited transcript of an interview with Dr. Mabel Lee, who translated 2000 Nobel Prize winner Gao Xingjian’s novel Soul Mountain into English. The interview was conducted in April 2001 by Lily Liu, who has translated the essays of contemporary Chinese women writers of the Republic of China. She works as a writer/editor in Washington, D.C.

Dr. Mabel Lee is Honorary Associate Professor in Chinese Studies at the University of Sydney in Australia. Born in Australia of Chinese parents, she majored in Chinese at the University of Sydney, where she obtained her B.A. with First Class Honours in 1961 and her Ph.D. in 1966. She joined the University faculty in January 1966. She retired from teaching in January 2000, but has continued to supervise Ph.D. candidates.

Dr. Lee’s research has focused on late 19th- and 20th-century Chinese intellectual history and literature. She has published on Zhang Taiyan, Lu Xun, Gao Xingjian, Liu Zaifu, and Yang Lian. She speaks fluent Mandarin and Cantonese Chinese.

Q. How did you first meet Gao Xingjian?
A. I met Gao Xingjian in Paris on March 23, 1991. I was traveling to Berlin and on to Copenhagen with my daughter and had arranged to meet Chinese poet Yang Lian in Paris. At the time I had translated two volumes of Yang Lian’s poetry, Masks and Crocodile (Wild Peony, Sydney, 1990) and The Dead in Exile (Tiananmen Publications, Canberra, 1990), and had just completed the manuscript of Yi (Green Integer/Sun & Moon, Los Angeles, forthcoming 2001).

Yang Lian at some point suggested, “Let’s go and see Gao Xingjian!” So, after a phone call, we arrived at his apartment in Bagnolet. During the night, Gao spoke about some of the real incidents that occurred following the ban on the performance of his play “Bus Stop” in 1983 and his flight from Beijing in order to avoid having to write self-criticisms and possibly being sent to a prison farm. He’s a great storyteller.

He also brought out a copy of Lingshan, which had been published in Taipei the year before. After leafing through the pages, to my own surprise and to his, I asked if he had a translator and if he would like me to work on the translation of Lingshan. He said, “I’d be delighted if you would.” No other details were discussed, but a verbal agreement had been made on the spot.

Q. Why did you want to translate this book?
A. I liked the idea of Gao’s experimentation with narrative techniques, and the poetic feel of his language had enormous appeal. I somehow sensed that Lingshan was an important work, and after I had undertaken to translate it, it took on the nature of a mission. I completed the manuscript of Soul Mountain in 1998 and then sought a publisher through a literary agent.
Q. Was it easy for the literary agent to find a publisher? Why or why not?

A. Translations generally do not sell well in Australia. Despite an excellent reader’s report from HarperCollins (Australia), it took them well over six months before a contract was signed.

Q. What is Soul Mountain about?

A. I have called Soul Mountain “autobiographical fiction.” Much of serious fictional writing has varying degrees of autobiography. Soul Mountain (written 1982-1989) essentially tells about the narrator’s five-month journey in the Chinese hinterland after fleeing Beijing. These are the “I” chapters.

The “you and she” chapters relate things that passed through his mind during that time (memories of childhood, reflections, observations, old stories, new stories, thoughts about people he knows and about himself). Significantly, the work is a grand experiment and is a realization of Gao’s thinking (theories) about what constitutes a modern novel.

Q. Because Gao was not well known to readers in English, you wrote an introduction for the English edition. What key points did you wish to convey in your introduction?

A. The ability of literature to transcend language and cultural barriers. I wanted readers to appreciate Gao’s considerable reading in European literature as well as his wide reading in China’s rich literary heritage, his translation of European writers such as Beckett, Ionesco, and Prévert into Chinese, and the fact that he wrote about recent and contemporary developments in European literature.

Q. After Lingshan was published in Taipei in 1990, who did the first translation and into what language?


Q. As you were translating his writings, did Gao ever suggest that you contact his other translators (Prof. Malmqvist [Swedish] or Noel and Liliane Dutrait [French] or Gilbert C.F. Fong [English])? Or did you seek them out yourself to discuss the translation of his writings?

A. He did not suggest this nor did I feel the need to contact them. I know Goran Malmqvist, but I did not contact him regarding the translation. I did not meet the Dutraits or Gilbert Fong until recently in Stockholm.

Q. Have you talked with them about translating Gao’s writings? What comments have they made that resonate with you?

A. We talked about other things, but never about translation. We all greatly admire Gao’s writings. That was why we wanted to translate his works.

Q. Which work by Gao did you first come into contact with (in Chinese or in translation)?

A. I knew of Gao and had read in translation abstracts of his plays Absolute Signal and Bus Stop. I later read these and other of his plays in Chinese.

Q. Please use three adjectives to describe Gao.

A. Not so easy in single words. He is a gentle person, committed (to literary and artistic creation), a connoisseur.

Q. You said that Gao is a great storyteller. How is that apparent in his writing?

A. Soul Mountain is in large part undisguised storytelling and, as a whole, it is a conglomeration of a variety of storytelling modes superimposed one upon the other. He has creatively adapted traditional Chinese storytelling techniques to suit himself (a modern writer, reader, and critic with a high degree of artistic sensitivity). It should be noted that he started to design the structure of the novel in 1982 and took the almost-completed manuscript of the
novel with him when he left China in 1987; he firmly believed that it was a work he could not hope to publish in China.

**Q.** Gao has also written plays, literary criticism, etc. Did you consult these other writings as you were translating Soul Mountain? If so, how did exposure to the other genres he writes in help you as you translated Soul Mountain?

A. I read Gao’s other writings for the purpose of writing academic research papers on his work. They gave me a good understanding of him, but did not have a direct impact on the translation of Soul Mountain.

**Q.** You have written about Gao’s writings in academic papers. How has your study of his writings helped you in translating his book?

A. His theoretical essays and other writings convinced me of the great responsibility I had to the translation of Soul Mountain. It convinced me of the important place he holds in Chinese literary history.

**Q.** You worked on the translation of Soul Mountain for several years. Please tell us how you handled this translation project.

A. In 1991, I was appointed Head of the School of Asian Studies, an amalgamation of several departments of Asian languages and studies. I found it impossible to work on the translation until 1993, after my appointment as Head of the School ended. As a senior member of staff in Chinese Studies, I taught on average nine hours per week plus supervising Ph.D. students. I also co-edited two University of Sydney Series: The East Asian Series, and the World Literature Series as well as the Journal of the Oriental Society of Australia (JOSA). I would work on translating Soul Mountain whenever I could find time, mostly during weekends. I finished in 1998.

**Q.** What was the most difficult aspect about translating Soul Mountain?

A. The botanical terms and names of animals.

**Q.** How did you find the right translations? Did you consult some special resource?

A. Dictionaries were, of course, invaluable throughout, and I have a few colleagues and friends that I could turn to if there were specific problems I could not resolve.

**Q.** What did you like best about translating this book?

A. I found working through the book an aesthetic experience of many dimensions. I could hear the many voices of the storyteller coming through to me and I could share the many experiences of the pronoun characters of the novel. It was fun to translate Soul Mountain because Gao writes well and is a good storyteller.

**Q.** You teach at the University of Sydney. You are not a professional translator. What special qualities are needed to be a good literary translator?

A. I think it is important for a translator to like every aspect of a work she/he is translating. I can say that I like every aspect of Gao’s writings. I also respect him as a person. I could not dedicate myself to translating the work of a writer I did not like/respect. The ability to commit to translating something is important. There are writings that I would not and could not translate.

**Q.** Such as?

A. I am not a professional translator and am, therefore, self-indulgent in what I choose to translate. I only translate writings that for me resound with poetry, i.e., that for me have linguistic appeal and, therefore, provide me with enjoyment as I translate them. Soul Mountain is the first work of fiction that I have translated. Prior to that I had only translated poetry (Lu Xun and Yang Lian). In my view, Soul Mountain can be considered a very long poem.
Also, for me what Gao says is interesting. The writings of some authors do not interest me and I simply would not and could not translate something that I did not find interesting as well as being beautifully written.

**Q. What do you think is “lost” in translation from one language into another?**

A. The original language is “lost,” but an equivalent language can be found. This is why I think it is essential for the translator to like and to have a close affinity for the work being translated. It is essential to tap in on what the Chinese call “qi” (or internal spirit) in a work to successfully translate it. Gao’s language is like poetry and I translate it as poetry.

**Q. What do you mean his language is “like poetry”?**

A. His language has auditory appeal. Importantly, he has something interesting to say and he says it very beautifully in language.

**Q. Gao has said that his first draft of his writings is always his recorded voice. Did you read his writing aloud as you were translating?**

A. I was immediately aware of the poetic feel (the auditory element is important) of Soul Mountain and in all of Gao’s writing. I consciously attempted to find words that would give a similar feel.

**Q. The Chinese have a saying, “There is painting in his poetry; there is poetry in his painting.” What does Gao “paint” in the poetic language of Soul Mountain?**

A. I found many descriptions in Soul Mountain of people, natural scenery, and buildings to be like paintings and at times cinematic. Gao is a talented artist, and this artistic sensitivity infuses the whole of the work Soul Mountain. It is most conspicuous in descriptions, of course.

**Q. What do you think is “gained” in translating literary works from one language into another?**

A. I suppose some badly written work could—in the hands of a good translator—be made better, but why bother translating something that’s badly written? If the translator is such a good writer, why not be a writer herself/himself? My academic training predisposes me to stick rigidly to the text.

**Q. Was there any place in Soul Mountain where you could not stick rigidly to the text? Why and what did you do?**

A. Repetition of the same noun is fine in Chinese. This looks clumsy in English and can easily be remedied by the use of “it” or some other word. In Chinese, the subject and object of a sentence are not used because the context alone is adequate. When translating, sometimes it is necessary to add the subject or object.

**Q. Were there any places where there was a need to add something (a footnote, etc.) to help readers in English better understand Chinese culture or something else? What was it and how did you resolve the need to explain the text?**

A. I do not use footnotes, unless they exist in the original text I am translating. Chinese-language readers will read and understand the original text with differing levels of understanding. In about two places I added a minimal number of words to describe items of food.

**Q. Is the act of translating an act of “creating” or “re-writing”?**

A. For me, translation is “re-writing” a text in another language. As it is my practice to adhere as closely as possible to the text, translating is probably less “creating” for me than for translators whose practice it is to make a translation more easily digestible for a target readership. Different texts are more difficult than others to translate. I would not attempt to translate a text for which I had no affinity.
Q. Could you have translated the title any other way (“Spirit Mountain,” etc.), and why did you choose the words “Soul Mountain”?

A. For me, the word “spirit” lacks the dynamic thrust of “soul.” Taking into consideration the whole of the novel Lingshan, I prefer the word “soul.”

Q. Are you currently at work translating any other writing by Gao?

A. I am translating One Man’s Bible, his second novel, and expect to submit it to HarperCollins (USA) about July. It was published in Chinese in Taipei in 1999, in French in early 2000, and in Swedish at the end of 2000. I cannot rush the translation. I am intent on savoring and enjoying the translation of One Man’s Bible as I had the translation of Soul Mountain.

I also have other commitments. I am on the Board of the Sydney Writers’ Festival and have played a key part in arranging for a team of Chinese writers and translators to participate in this year’s events on May 14-20. The team consists of the Shandong novelist Mo Yan (Red Sorghum, Republic of Wine, and Big Breasts and Wide Hips) and his American translator Howard Goldblatt, Yunnan poet Yu Jian and his Australian translator Simon Patton, and the U.S.-based Taiwan writer and translator Sylvia Li-chun Lin, who co-translated with Howard Goldblatt the Taiwan writer Chu T’ien-wen’s Notes of a Desolate Man.

Q. How does One Man’s Bible differ from Soul Mountain?

A. One Man’s Bible is a study of the insidious psychological manipulation of individuals to effectively bring about social and political conformity during the Cultural Revolution in China. Gao sees himself as complicit in those tragic events, and it is his own thinking and behavior that are held up for scrupulous examination in this novel. In One Man’s Bible, the extent of psychological self-analysis of a person living through the Cultural Revolution, to the best of my knowledge, has not been attempted with such unrelenting honesty in any other work of literature.

Q. What do you like best about translating Gao’s second novel?

A. The work allows one to comprehend precisely how the irrational events of the Cultural Revolution were able to take place.

Q. What are some issues or problems confronting translators of contemporary Chinese literature?

A. Translation does not count as “research” for academics, and it generally doesn’t help in applications for promotion, etc. Also, finding publishers for translations is a problem. As far as I know, the general practice is that publishers will commission a translation. I think my experience is significantly different. I had completed the translation and then sought a publisher, and Gao and I share the royalties, 60 percent - 40 percent.

Q. You are based in Australia. Did you have to make decisions re: what kind of “English” (British/Australian/American English) to use in your translation?

A. I live in Australia, but I think it is a more “neutral” type of English. I cannot use words that are not natural to my own style.

Q. There was talk after Gao won the Nobel Prize that he won on more than the literary merit of his writings (e.g., the fact that his Swedish translator, Goran Malmqvist, is a member of the Swedish Academy, which decides the recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature). What is your reaction to these comments?

A. All of Gao’s major writings (including his second novel One Man’s Bible) were available in French prior to the Nobel Prize announcement. I expect all of the Nobel Prize Committee would have read Gao’s writings in French; most Scandinavians read French and English as well as Swedish. Goran Malmqvist has translated many Chinese writers apart from Gao.
In France, as early as 1992, Gao received the award of Chevalier for his contributions to literature. His plays have been performed internationally since he relocated to Paris in 1987. His two novels were selling well in France before the Nobel Prize announcement. Gilbert Fong’s English translation of six of Gao’s plays was published in 1999, and my translation of *Soul Mountain* was published in English in mid-2000.

**Q. Does translating literary works into English make them more “accessible” for consideration for international literary prizes?**

A. The Nobel Prize demonstrated that Gao’s major writings work in three languages, and I think this was an important consideration. With other prizes, one of the criteria may be that a work also be available in English translation.

**Q. Lingshan was published first in Chinese in Taipei, but it did not receive the public acclaim (selling fewer than 1,000 copies) that it has since received after Gao won the Nobel Prize. What do you think about the criticism some have made that Chinese readers did not value his writings until Western critical acclaim?**

A. This is the case with most serious writing.... Interestingly, in Australia, before the Nobel Prize announcement, *Soul Mountain* had sold over 4,000 copies, which is not bad for the size of the population!

**Q. Why is translation of literature important?**

A. Serious literature represents the thinking of reflective minds in one culture. Translation allows access to different perspectives on the same topic: human beings with all their flaws and imperfections.

**Q. Will you continue to do literary translations?**

A. I am kept quite busy with working on Gao’s fiction, but I am also translating a bit of poetry occasionally.

**Q. Whose poems?**

A. Poems by Yang Lian and Hong Ying. My translations of Hong Ying’s poems have been published in Australian literary journals such as *Meanjin*, *Southerly*, and *Otherland* and in the American journal *Talisman*. A poem by Yang Lian will be published in the Australian e-poetry journal *Jacket*.

**Q. Why did you choose these poets’ works to translate?**

A. I have translated and published Yang Lian’s poems in the past. I like his poetry. I also like Hong Ying’s poems.

**Q. For you, what is the most difficult thing about translating Chinese poetry into English?**

A. As with all translation, making the translation sound as good and read as well in English as the original, grasping that vital essence that makes it poetry and reproducing it.

**Q. How do you feel about your accomplishment of having made available the English translation of *Soul Mountain*?**

A. I feel great, and I have had e-mails from all parts of the world to thank me for making it possible for them to read it. The translator always puts her or his head on the chopping block, and to have translated the major novel of the controversial Nobel Prize winner Gao Xingjian singles out the translator for attack as well. But like Gao, I am pretty tough and have confidence in my work.

**Q. What are you proudest of with regard to your translation of *Soul Mountain*?**

A. The fact that I completed the translation. The timing of the first publication in Australia was perfect. Gao Xingjian came to launch the Australian publication of *Soul Mountain* in early July 2000, and on October 12 he was declared the winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature.
Q. Gao is the first Chinese writer to win the Nobel Prize for Literature. How do you feel about the role that you have played as the translator of Soul Mountain?

A. I naturally feel great about making the work available to English readers. Gao has won gold and I feel I have been sprinkled with gold dust.
The following was presented as the keynote address at the ALTA Conference in Raleigh, North Carolina in October 2001.

I will begin with a poem of mine that, although it is not a translation, would probably have come out quite differently, if at all, if I had not done quite a bit of translation. It’s called “I Thought She Said.”

“I have to finish one more parrot bath.”
My mind stalled out on water, dusty wings,
green feathers floating in a soapy tub.
That time, I’m glad to say, I didn’t speak before I knew that she meant “paragraph.”
That “paragraph,” I mean, is what she’d said.

My mind slipped into gear and drifted by a bird I actually met one afternoon while I was waiting for a wheel alignment. Beyond the crackling Naugahyde I sat on, out in the service bay, I heard the ring, sharp as the first bite of a winter apple,
of a tire iron on concrete. Did Gary Snyder, maybe, say poetry should sound like that?
Six more times in thirty minutes. Finally I made a smart remark about slippery tools, and the woman working behind the counter said,

“It’s the bird.” Was that really what she’d said?

She glanced over her shoulder as if to say I could get up and go see for myself.
I looked in a back room, and there he was, pacing his dowel perch: a myna bird.
“He learned to make that noise last month,” she said,

“and we can’t hardly tell the difference.” 1

I am grateful to John Balaban and to my old friend Lucinda MacKethan for the compliment they have paid me in asking that I address you. It is dangerously flattering to hear that I might say something of interest to a room full of people who know more than I do about what may be the most frustrating of the literary arts. It is also daunting to stand here at a moment when our hearts are heavy, partly because of insufficient and inadequate translation, and to know that I have little more to say about that than those who urge us to go on with our lives as best we can.

Finally, it is usefully humbling to be reminded that I have translated at least as many lines of verse as I have written for or as myself, and that it has only been in the past dozen years or so that I have acknowledged the art’s large place in my life. For years, I am sorry and ashamed to confess, I thought of translation as secondary, something I did instead of what I was pleased to refer to as my "real work" or my “own work.” I’ve run into this attitude from time to time among other writers; the notion is that when one is unable to do original work, because of writer’s block or ordinary dryness of the well, translation is a nice way to keep one’s hand in. And I suppose it may be, if conditions are right, but I think it is outrageously arrogant to believe that, when my writing resources are depleted, I can rise to the challenge of doing justice to a writer who is infinitely my superior: Sophocles, for one of the thousands of possible examples. If I’m not up to writing real poetry, then I’m not up to making a translation of even a short passage from one of his plays.

Especially given certain of my biases as a translator. I have worked and thought in this field for long enough that I no longer feel apologetic about it, but I recognize that honorable people can be found who disapprove of the approach that I, by no means uniquely, take to some translation projects. Though I have made translations from languages I know pretty well, I have also done a lot of work that has required outside aid of various kinds, because of my relative ignorance of the original language. The extreme example in my case would be Hebrew, of which I

1. "and we can’t hardly tell the difference."
know not a syllable. Yet in collaboration with the Israeli poet and journalist Moshe Dor, I have made versions of poems by him and some of his contemporaries, based on literal renderings he has provided, and on follow-up conversations with him, in which I can find out some of the things he may have forgotten to tell me. (“It’s funny right here. Is it supposed to be?”) His English is entirely adequate to complicated discussion; indeed I think it is mostly modesty that keeps him from experiments with writing in it, so if what I come up with is okay with him, it’s okay with me. But there would be no use in my sitting down with a copy of the original and an oral examiner who wants me to defend my choices. “You know what to do,” he likes to say. “Make a poem out of it.”

Translating poetry requires the ability to write poetry, if the final result is at least partly intended to persuade readers that the original is poetry.

This occasion has prompted me to think back a little and try to recall pivotal moments that led me into the translation of poetry. I will not wax autobiographical for too long, I hope. To begin with, I must here acknowledge three old debts, two of which I have written about before. My secondary-school Latin and French teachers, Julius B. Laramore and Eugénie Vickery, taught me not only the languages but also what poetry in them sounded like. I have since met many language teachers who, like many another person, do not especially care for poetry, but Mr. Laramore and Madame Vickery did care about it and deepened my passion for it in their ways. But I made no literary translations under their direct tutelage.

(Incidentally, as I learned languages other than my own, there came moments when anything written in them was interesting, because of the intellectual thrill of merely understanding it. I only gradually came to realize that an indicator of one’s understanding of a language is the ability to spot tedium or foolishness expressed in it.)

I continued to study French in college through my third year, but also in my third year I took up Italian, under Edoardo Lèbano, then a young professor who had come into a situation whose effects plagued him for at least a year.

At the University of Virginia in the 1950s and 1960s, Professor Oreste Rinetti had sole responsibility for Italian. Fairly or not, he developed a reputation as a soft touch, and Italian came to be known, among those whose talents in that line were limited, as the way to fulfill the undergraduate language requirement. Then, halfway through a year, Professor Rinetti died. The second semester was picked up by the Italian wife of a distinguished English professor. Signora Langbaum flunked a bunch of guys. The following fall, Signor Lèbano inherited them. Among these dazed and wounded men, many of them athletes, I came to the study of the first language from which I made translations of poetry.

Signor Lèbano was one of those rare individuals with a deep gift for teaching beginning language courses. He had boundless energy, enthusiasm for drill, a good sense of humor, and a passion for the language itself. He was of something less than middle stature, and several of the students, basketball players, greatly exceeded it. He would send us to the board to write sentences, which we tended to do at the level of our own eyes. After we sat down, Signor Lèbano would go at our efforts with a pointer. Then he would erase them, sometimes having to leap into the air and take quick reaching swipes at lines near the top of the board. You will know what I mean by powerful teaching when I say that these balletic moments did not diminish our respect for Signor Lèbano.

A year later I had my first experience with managed outcomes in literary contests. Signor Lèbano saw me on the street near Mincer’s Pipe Shop, hailed me, and said he had a problem he thought I could help him with. His department sponsored an essay contest in Italian literature and civilization; if my memory does not betray me, Professor Rinetti may have established it; in any case, after his death it had been named for him. It had been won two years in a row by a student who seemed prepared to win it again. Signor Lèbano thought that this would be too bad. English professors had told him that I wrote poetry tolerably well for a student, and so maybe I would like to assemble a group of translations and write an introduction for it. The essay did not have to be in the Italian language. It would be best if the translations themselves were, well, poetry, not just translation, if I took his meaning.
Those were the first words directly addressed to me about what my aims as a literary translator ought to be. I do not believe I have acknowledged that before. It is an immense debt, and I rejoice in having incurred it. Over the next several weeks I clawed out first-draft versions of poems by Ungaretti, Penna, Sereni, Pasolini, Saba, and others, and did what I could to turn those into poems. In those days I was still intimidated by the originals and sought a kind of faithfulness to them that probably can’t be achieved, although in the case at least of a short poem of Sandro Penna’s I retained the stanza form, and so must have had to take liberties, as the saying goes. As if any of us did not.

The Rinetti award can be found among the very early entries on my curriculum vitae, although I have always thought I would not have had a chance at it if an abler man had not earlier worn out his welcome. Does that sound falsely modest? I speak of one who is now Professor Walter Korte, Director of Film Studies at the University of Virginia, widely acknowledged as an important critic especially of the films of Luchino Visconti.

The following year I had the astounding good fortune to be in a very small graduate creative writing program—I had two classmates, strictly speaking, though Lucinda MacKethan, Lee Smith, Annie Dillard, Ann Jones, Ann Bradford Warner, and others were all in the junior class at Hollins at that time, and Margaret Gibson was a senior—where I was able to work very closely with William Jay Smith, as well as Louis D. Rubin, Jr. Bill Smith taught a course in French Symbolist poets, and while taking it I began to make translations of Baudelaire and Verlaine. Smith took me a long way toward understanding what translation is and invited me into a couple of anthologies he was editing of French and Italian poems.

The year after that, during my first teaching appointment, I heard from William Arrowsmith, who wondered if I wanted to try translating a Greek tragedy in collaboration with a classicist. I was too young—twenty-five—and ignorant to be anything but pleased and flattered, and I signed on to do The Children of Herakles, which finally appeared in 1981 with Robert A. Brooks as my collaborator. Let me be brief: it was a valuable and deeply troubling experience. I ended up studying Greek for a while, because I finally decided that at that time, for me, the collaboration Arrowsmith visualized was impossible. I needed to know something more about what I was doing than what a good classicist said I was doing. I won’t linger over the forces that have conspired to keep that series from being completed, though it has been in process for thirty-five years. Arrowsmith was in some ways unreasonable, but I learned more from him than from anyone else about how to think about what translation can be—as well as what it can’t be. It was Arrowsmith from whom I first heard this, about three basic levels of diction in classical translation: pinion him, seize him, grab him.

Enough autobiography.

We know now—no. We have long known, and now more widely acknowledge, that the convergence of a text and one reader’s consciousness will be unique. Sometimes this uniqueness involves error that can be traced, and sometimes not. A pertinent passage occurs in Proust’s essay “Sur la lecture,” translated by Jean Autret and William Burford as “On Reading.” It appeared first in a journal, then as the Preface to Proust’s translation of Ruskin’s Sesame and Lilies. In it, Proust recalls some of the pleasures of reading Théophile Gautier’s le Capitaine Fracasse. I will impose a somewhat lengthy quotation upon you, from the translation:

In it I liked, above all, two or three sentences which seemed to me the most original and beautiful in the book. I did not imagine that another author might ever have written any comparable to them. But I had the feeling that their beauty corresponded to a reality of which Théophile Gautier would let us catch but a glimpse, once or twice in a book. And since I thought he assuredly knew it in its entirety, I would have liked to read other books by him where all the sentences would be as beautiful as those, and would be about things on which I would have wished to have his opinion. “Laughing is not cruel by nature; it distinguishes man from beast, and it is, as it appears in the Odyssey of Homer, poet of Greek fire, the property of the immortal and
happy gods, who laugh Olympianly to their heart’s content in the leisure of eternity.” This sentence truly intoxicated me. I thought I perceived a marvelous antiquity through that Middle Ages which only Gautier could reveal to me.2

Proust annotates the sentence thus, in the translation:

Actually, this sentence is not found, at least in this form, in *le Capitaine Fracasse*. Instead of “as it appears in the *Odyssey* of Homer, poet of Greek fire,” there is simply “according to Homer.” But since the expressions “it appears from Homer,” “it appears from the *Odyssey*,” which are found elsewhere in the same book, gave me a pleasure of the same quality, I have taken the liberty so that the example might be more striking for the reader, of fusing all these beauties into one, now that, strictly speaking, I no longer have a religious respect for them. Elsewhere in *le Capitaine Fracasse* Homer is qualified as poet of Greek fire, and I have no doubt that this too enchanted me. However, I am no longer able to bring back accurately enough those forgotten joys to be assured I have not exaggerated and gone too far in accumulating so many wonders in one single sentence! Yet I do not believe so. And I think with regret that the exaltation with which I repeated the sentence from *le Capitaine Fracasse* to the irises and periwinkles leaning at the river’s edge, while I trampled underfoot the stones of the path, would have been still more delicious had I been able to find in a single sentence by Gautier so many charms which my own artifice gathers together today without, alas, succeeding in giving me any pleasure.3

Those of you familiar with this remarkable essay may recall that itlavishes perhaps four of its thirty pages on Ruskin. But it is fairly straightforward in its suggestion that one of the things we do in translating, or even in recalling an original text, is to try to make it what we want it to be. As I am fond of saying to my translation students, most of whom are also pursuing the MFA in creative writing, “You know how you can read something and wish with an unusually strong and deep pang that you had written it yourself? Well, if it’s in a language other than yours, maybe you can.” I am not trying to be cavalier or provocative. I do not mean that even creative writers often have good reasons for appropriating, colonizing, or otherwise stealing work from other languages for the gratification of their own particular voices. But I do believe that translation is best done by those who understand, respect, and even rejoice in its impossibilities. Pope may have said it better, in the preface to his *Iliad*:

I know no Liberties one ought to take, but those which are necessary for transfusing the Spirit of the Original, and supporting the Poetical Style of the Translation: and I will venture to say, there have not been more Men misled in former times by servile dull Adherence to the Letter, than have been deluded in ours by a chimerical insolent Hope of raising and improving their Author.4

I have committed my share of chimerical insolences. Some I have excused by noting their thumping obtrusiveness: there is clearly no way the original could have done or said exactly what I have decided to have the translation do or say, for the sake of some gesture I can’t duplicate but would like to suggest. One tiny example, which comes to mind partly because we are where we are: In Plautus’ *Curculio—The Weevil*—the main character, a clown and parasite, is briefly pretending to be the representative of a miles gloriosus who is absent because, the parasite says, he is supervising the construction of a seven-foot gold monument to his latest exploits. He is asked what those were, and Curculio replies, in my rendition:

Monumental! The Persians, Paphlagonians, Sinopians, Arabs, Carians, Cretans, Syrians, Rhodes and Lycia, Upper Devouria and Lower Bibula, Centauromachia
and Unomammaria, the Libyan coast, 
all of Hangoveria, half the nations 
of the world, to say nothing of Albania 
and the Duke University English Department, 
have fallen to him, fighting alone, in three 
weeks.5

There are times, I think, when the best we can 
hope for is a certain grace in demonstration of the 
original’s intractability. There is Hadrian’s little sound 
machine, for instance:

Animula vagula blandula
Hospes comesque corporis
Quae nunc abibis in loca
Pallidula rigida nudula
Nec ut soles, dabis iocos?

Here is a version made by Lord Byron:

Ah! Gentle, fleeting, wav’ring sprite, 
Friend and associate of this clay!
To what unknown region borne
Wilt thou now wing thy distant flight?
No more with wonted humor gay,
But pallid, cheerless, and forlorn.6

And this, by Stevie Smith:

Little soul so sleek and smiling 
Flesh’s friend and guest also
Where departing will you wander
Growing paler now and languid
And not joking as you used to?7

Weird, isn’t it? One rarely encounters trochaic tetrameter outside of Longfellow (or his source, the Kalevala, where I have not yet sought to encounter it), but there it is. Let me share with you, though it has nothing to do with translation, a short passage from one of the most extraordinarily unfortunate uses of this meter, a long Victorian didactic piece by Edward Newman called “The Insect Hunters”:

First of walkers come the Earwigs, 
Earwigs or FORFICULINA.

At the tail we find a weapon
Very like a pair of pincers,
And with this ’tis said the earwigs
Open and fold up the hind wings.
You may watch them and observe it;
I have never had that pleasure.

My favorite Anglophone rendition of Hadrian’s poem is J. V. Cunningham’s:

My little soul, my vagrant charmer, 
The friend and houseguest of this matter, 
Where will you now be visitor 
In naked pallor, little soul, 
And not so witty as you were?8

Hearing the range of dictions in those three translations, I return to Pope’s Homer and Maynard Mack’s discussion of it in the Twickenham Edition. In a footnote he recalls Matthew Arnold’s failure to notice one of the chief impossibilities of translation. Arnold is quoted thus: “Chapman translates his object into Elizabethan, as Pope translates it into the Augustan of Queen Anne.” Mack says that Arnold “reaches the curiously obtuse conclusion that it could (and of course should) have been otherwise” (TE VII xlix-l). But to refine this a little, we have Douglas McKnight’s opinion that “Of English translators, only Pope has consistently rejected both the irresponsibility of a wholly personal idiom and the rigor mortis of a bogus one” (TE VII exciii). There, I think, is how to say why Cunningham’s Hadrian is more convincing to me than Smith’s or Byron’s.

This is one of those occasional successes that become more admirable the more closely we compare them with the originals. That’s a dubious kind of triumph in certain ways, and not hard to mistake, or to counterfeit. It is extremely tempting sometimes, and risky, to make translational witticisms that can only be appreciated when compared with the original. Such parochial triumphs should be avoided, I think. We so rarely know what we are saying to one another, after all, that even graceful mistranslation can sometimes seem a miracle.

I opened in my verse voice, and would like to end by going back out of prose. This time, though,
I’ve brought along the Big Guy, by whom this time I mean Sophocles; he’ll be doing most of the work.

You may recall that his Electra opens with a conference between Orestes and his old tutor and guardian, the Paidagogus, as they stand before the house formerly Agamemnon’s, now that of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. They plan to assist Electra in avenging Agamemnon’s death and agree that it will be best if people here believe Orestes to be dead. Orestes instructs the Paidagogus to announce Orestes’ death in a chariot race during some athletic celebration. “Fill in the details as best you can,” Orestes says (in one view; there is argument for a reading that would mean “swear to it” instead of “fill it out”), and the Paidagogus rises to the challenge. It is either the best or the second-best chariot race in classical literature; the other is in the Iliad, among the funeral games for Patroclus. The striking thing here, though, is that this race is entirely fictional, invented in order to deceive; nevertheless, the Paidagogus had a fine time with it:

**Paedagogus**

I’ll tell you everything; that is why I came. Orestes made his way to the Delphic shrine to enter those games that are the pride of Greece. The herald first called runners to the footrace, and he came on the course, his splendid body admired by everyone. He took the lead right at the start and held it all the way. To say it all as quickly as I can, I do not know a man who has matched him in triumphant acts of strength and skill, but this is clear: in all announced results, his name came first, and people envied him each time they heard the herald call him Argive, Orestes by name, and Agamemnon’s son—son of the man who led that host of Greeks. So, for a while, things went that way for him. But human strength is nothing to the gods; a day came when at sunrise race-horses were hitched to chariots and took the course; he was there along with all the others. One was an Achaean, and one was Spartan; there were two drivers from Libya, and fifth came Orestes, driving mares from Thessaly. Sixth was an Aetolian with chestnut colts; a Magnesian was the seventh, and the eighth was an Aenian with white horses. Ninth, a man from Athens, city of the gods; the tenth and final driver was Boeotian. They put their chariots under starter’s orders and took positions given them by lot. When the bronze trumpet sounded, they were off. They shouted at their horses, shook the reins, and a rumbling dust-cloud lifted from the course and pulsed with the rattling of the chariots—a crowded, tight-packed charge of men with whips trying to break from the tangled hubs and horses. Behind them and beside their wheels the breath and lathered foam of horses wheezed and spattered. Orestes drove to hug the turning-post, almost grazing it every time with his inside wheel, checking his inside horse, letting the other run. So far all chariots were still up and rolling. But then the Aenian’s hard-mouthed colts, coming out of the turn into the seventh lap, got out of his control and crashed head first into the Libyan—the one from Barca. This started a pileup, chariots crashing one after the other, until the whole race-course of Crisa churned with chariot-wreckage. The Athenian driver was alert enough to see all this and make a clever move: he pulled aside and let the flood go by. Orestes, too, had stayed just off the pace, trusting the last lap to bring him home in front. But when he saw the race was down to him and the Athenian, he gave a shout that rang his horses’ ears, and took out after him. Yoke to yoke they raced, one pulling ahead for a few strides, then the other. Up to now Orestes had driven safely through each lap and kept his chariot’s wheels on the ground. Then he slipped and let the left rein go slack halfway through a turn, and hit the pillar, cracked the axle box in two, and spilled out over the chariot-rail, tangled in the long reins, and his horses dragged him all over the
course.
The whole crowd screamed, watching this young man who had won so much and then had such bad luck, bouncing over the hard ground until charioteers reined in his charging horses and cut him loose, so mangled that his friends would not have known him. They made a pyre and burned him right away, and Phocian men appointed to the task now bring this lowly dust, once a mighty man, in a small bronze urn for burial at home. That was it—horrible just to hear, but for us who saw it, the greatest sorrow I have seen.9

They believed him.

Notes

3 *On Reading*, 75.
6 Hours of Idleness, 1807.
INTERVIEW WITH YANG XIANYI

By Qian Duoxiu and E. S-P. Almberg

Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang have been regarded as two master translators for approximately 60 years on the Chinese Mainland. From their published translations, we find that Xianyi has produced about 10 Chinese translations from different foreign languages, including Greek, Latin, English and Medieval French. Xianyi and Gladys have done more than 50 English translations of Chinese works, most of them literary in nature, and Gladys alone has done more than 20 English translations of modern Chinese novels. Their translations have been acclaimed in both quantity and quality and thus are a great contribution to the introduction of Chinese literature and culture to the West.

However, although it is believed that some principles and guidelines may support their work, they have not expressed much about the background to their translating activity. It is a pity that Gladys passed away in 1999. Yang Xianyi is now 87 years old. To gain some clear ideas about their philosophy of translation, we prepared some questions and took advantage of an interview to get his answers to these questions last May. In our opinion, Yang Xianyi is quite modest, open-minded, affable, and unassuming. We marvel at his quickness of mind, the profound knowledge he expressed in simple language, and his sagacity. Judging from his words, we cannot imagine that he is almost 90! During the interview, he answered to some major questions concerning translation practice and theory. This interview, which was conducted in Chinese, is the first one, and more will come. Nonetheless, we thought it would be a good idea to share our initial experiences and findings with our colleagues. The following is the English translation of the interview.

Q: How did you get started in your translation work?

A: Gladys and I returned to China in the late summer of 1940. After we were back, we taught in different universities in the interior during the war years. In the first year, we taught in the Central University sponsored by the Kuomintang government in Chongqing, the capital at that time. But we found we were being spied upon by the University authority, and that made us very uncomfortable. So we went to teach in a new college in Guiyang. However, Gladys became pregnant and had to go back to Chengdu to her mother to get better care in childbirth. I followed her to Chengdu and taught there for half a year. But the experience there was again very disappointing. So we decided not to go on teaching in the universities. Just then, a friend introduced me to Prof. Liang Shiqiu, a very influential scholar who was heading the Translation Committee of the Institute of Translation and Compilation. Liang wanted us to head a section translating Chinese classics into English. They suggested that because Chinese classics in history were unknown to the West, we should translate *Zizhi Tongjian* (an historical guide to assist in the governance of the empire). This was a Song dynasty classic compiled by the scholar Sima Guang. Because we were rather disappointed with our teaching experience in the universities, we accepted this invitation gladly. Thus, we began our translation career.

Q: From all your translations, we can see that most of your work is on Chinese-English translation. Why not the other way around?

A: As I mentioned just now, Gladys and I decided to work in the Institute of Translation and Compilation in order to be together. I prepared the manuscripts with a typewriter and then Gladys made some corrections. Without her, I could not have rendered them into good English. We found this kind of life enjoyable.

Q: Your translations cover a lot of topics and languages, including translation from Latin, Greek, and English into Chinese, from Medieval French into Chinese, and, most of all, from Chinese into
English. How would you describe your proficiency in these languages?

A: I have never thought about this. When I was in middle school, my Chinese was better than most of my classmates. I could write essays in both classic Chinese and the vernacular. Then when I was in high school, I would go to the bookstore nearby to buy English books and read them. This may have helped to improve my English. Through such reading, I became interested in Greek literature and wanted to learn Greek. Later, when I was in London, I learned Greek and Latin through private tutors for more than two years.

My knowledge of French is not very good. Most of the time, I read English translations of French literature. When I was in Oxford, I studied French for three months and became very interested in La Chanson de Roland, written in Medieval French. Later, I translated this into Chinese. Anyway, my French is not very good.

Q: You have received many awards and have held various positions. This is undoubtedly a recognition of your achievements. Do they have any implications for the cause of Chinese-English translation?

A: Our culture at present is not as advanced as that of the West. But back in the Tang and Song Dynasties, we enjoyed a much more advanced culture than that of the West. There are a lot of merits in our ancient culture, which can be introduced to the West. Translation of these may help the Western world to better understand our culture.

Q: You and Gladys have translated both classical and modern Chinese literary works. Which do you prefer?

A: I like the classics better. But Gladys liked to translate contemporary stories, especially those written by women writers.

She made very quick progress in Chinese and she found she could understand modern Chinese better than classical Chinese. She was also very conscientious and willing to do more. So when some contemporary writers wanted to have their works translated into English, Gladys helped them and she became good friends with many of these women writers.

Q: Could you have your own choices in translation?

A: We both liked Lu Xun very much. When we first began our work in the Foreign Languages Press, we were asked to translate Lu Xun’s works. At that time, the Press had a comprehensive plan of translation that was drawn up by the editors. Translators had little say in such matters. When I was asked to translate something that I didn’t like, I would try not to take part in it. But when I was on good terms with the editor in charge of a certain translation, I might try to put forward some suggestions.

Q: Have you ever been under pressure to do some translations?

A: Of course, yes. After liberation, there have been a lot of political tasks that one has to finish. Mass movements have become a part of Chinese life ever since the late 1950s. I remember once Chairman Mao Zedong said that we should not be afraid of ghosts (imperialists), then we were asked to translate a series of such stories.

Q: Are there any books you would like to translate most but have not been able to do so? What are the reasons?

A: Yes. For example, we like stories written by Shen Congwen in his early years very much. But you can only read some stories by him (The Border Town and Other Stories) in Chinese literature. Then Recollections of West Hunan was published in the 1980s only when I was the editor in chief. Later, Shanghai Translation Publishing House invited us to translate his early writings, but Gladys’ health was failing at that time, so we had to give it up. Of course, there are a lot of other classics that I would like to have translated, but now this is beyond me.
Q: Have you had any difficulties in your translation?

A: Yes. Chinese and English are two different languages and they reflect two different cultures. That’s why it is very difficult to convey the meaning faithfully from one language into another. Once you can get the target readers to understand what you translate, you are successful.

Q: Nowadays, a lot more books are translated from English into Chinese than from Chinese into English. How would you comment on this?

A: This is nothing surprising. We are backward and have to learn from the West. And owing to the lack of government support and funds, we are not in a position to translate and publish many Chinese works. This cannot be done by a translator on his own.

Q: When people talk about your translations from Chinese into English, most probably, Hongloumeng will be first to be mentioned. We know that before you translated Hongloumeng (A Dream of the Red Mansions), you consulted with Wu Shichang. Can you say a few words about that?

A: Well, this is a long story and I can’t finish it in only a few words. It was quite accidental for me to translate A Dream of the Red Mansions. At that time, in 1960, I wanted to translate some classics, but the leader of the Foreign Languages Press didn’t want me to do so. Zhou Yang was a very powerful writer and head of the Ministry of Culture. He heard that I knew Greek and Latin. So he said Homer was very important and there should be a good Chinese translation of Homer’s works, including the Odyssey and the Iliad. I was then holding a position as senior research fellow in the Institute of Foreign Literature at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, so the Institute invited me to work there for some time on Homer. The Press, although quite unhappy, dared not refuse this request. I finished the Odyssey in a year and was going to work on the Iliad when the Press thought out an idea of getting me back to work in the Press. They said that I should begin to work on the translation of a Chinese classical novel, and that novel was Hongloumeng.

As a matter of fact, none of the so-called four classical novels—A Dream of the Red Mansions, Outlaws of the Marsh, The Three Kingdoms, and A Pilgrimage to the West—had a good English translation. I myself preferred to translate The Three Kingdoms. But there was no bargain for me. So I started to translate Hongloumeng and finished a rough draft of about a hundred chapters by 1964.

Q: There are many versions of Hongloumeng. Which version did you base your translation on? Why?

A: Wu Shichang helped to decide on the Chinese version because he was an authority on Hongloumeng. According to him, I should translate only the first 80 chapters. But then, Jiang Qing, Chairman Mao’s wife, interfered and said all the 120 chapters should be translated. We had to agree. So we chose the first 80 chapters of Hongloumeng annotated by Yu Pingbo and the next 40 chapters in the popular version published by the People’s Literature Press.

If you ask why we chose this and that, I don’t think I can give you a satisfactory answer. Up to this day, the arguments about Hongloumeng have not yet all been solved.

Q: In your translation of A Dream of the Red Mansions, you chose to translate the names of the upper class by means of transliteration and those of the lower class by means of free translation. What was your reason in doing so?

A: There are two ways in translating Chinese names, transliteration or free translation. It would be very good if one can translate the meaning of a name. But the names in the novel are quite numerous and difficult to remember when translated freely into English. Besides, it is very difficult to translate the names of those people of the upper class. So we came to a compromise and decided to transliterate
the upper-class names and translate the lower-class names freely.

**Q**: Were there any difficulties in the subsequent publication?

**A**: There was little difficulty in publishing Homer. When we were translating *Hongloumeng*, I was already under suspicion. So I was not very happy then.

I finished the draft of the first 100 chapters, and Gladys helped to make corrections for the first 30 to 40 chapters. But then we were told to stop. The work resumed only in 1972, after we were released from jail, with the whole translation finished in 1974. If we had not been stopped, we could have finished it in two more years. But as things turned out, we spent about 10 years on it. When we finally finished it in 1974, we had little difficulty in publishing it because my name was politically cleared.

**Q**: When you translate classical and modern works, do you have different approaches?

**A**: Classical works are more grammatical than modern works. Lu Xun’s works are relatively grammatical and easier to deal with. Gladys felt more at ease when she was translating Lu Xun than the modern works because many modern works are not so grammatical and often very circuitous. So when we translated them, we usually had to delete some of the sentences as long as we could keep the original meaning. This does not go against our first principle of translation.

**Q**: In Lu Xun’s works, there are many sentences or passages that are simple and concise in form but profound in meaning. How did you translate these parts?

**A**: If there really is something implied in the original, we would try to make it clear in our translation through various methods.

**Q**: In order to let the target reader better understand the translation, sometimes it is necessary to have footnotes or endnotes. Is this the case?

**A**: Yes. This is especially so in translating classical Chinese. For example, in *The Songs of the South*, we have “昔我往矣，楊柳依依；今我來思，雨雪菲菲.” You may translate these two sentences freely into English by replacing the “楊柳 willows and poplars” with “roses.” But this cannot reflect the particular meaning associated with “willows and poplars” in Chinese. Such meanings are culturally bound and specific. So we have to keep the original image and add a footnote or an endnote when necessary.

**Q**: Before you translated Lu Xun’s works, you consulted with Feng Xuefeng. What did you talk about?

**A**: That was just after the Liberation. Feng was not the director of the People’s Literature Press yet. He was a veteran communist cadre who was quite at his leisure at that time. There was an editor in our press who was very familiar with Feng. Feng mentioned to him that he would like to have someone translate Lu Xun’s works. Then our Press agreed to let us translate Lu Xun’s works. The editor introduced us to Feng and we became friends. We decided it was impossible to translate all the works by Lu Xun because there are so many. Finally, we agreed to translate four volumes altogether.

**Q**: In Lu Xun’s works, he often criticized Liang Shiqiu, who was on the opposite side. You sometimes add a note to the criticism or irony, but sometimes, you don’t. Why?

**A**: My strategy is to add as few notes as possible. If the readers have to stop every now and then to read the notes, their flow of thought will be interrupted. That would be too bad.

**Q**: Why didn’t you translate his doggerels?

**A**: We didn’t think doggerels are a very important part of Lu Xun’s writings. We decided to focus on his major works, including his short stories, essays, and satires. These are representative. I know that
later, an English translator named W. J. F. Jenner translated his doggerels.

Q: Lu Xun was very good at satire and irony. How did you deal with these?

A: Well, when he was ironical, I would try to be ironical in my translation. When he talked about something implicitly, I would try to put it in a vague way.

Q: If the target readers don’t have the background knowledge, do you try to explain it in a note?

A: As I mentioned earlier, I would try my best to use as few notes as possible. However, if I am translating something academic, then I will consider adding some notes.

Q: Lu Xun’s writings are noted for their simplicity and trenchancy. He preferred to use simple words with very few syllables. We see in your translation, you managed to keep it this way. How did you do that?

A: When we translated his works, we tried to choose, among several synonyms, the simplest word. Our style is like this. But some translators may like to use big words with more syllables. Their style could be flowery.

Q: When you translate, what is your unit of translation?

A: Well, we have seldom translated word-for-word. We think it is good to translate according to the unit of meaning without feeling bound by the original syntax.

Q: When people talk about discourse analysis, English seems to be more linear while Chinese seems to be more spiral. How do you solve this difference in discourse?

A: It depends. If the original discourse structure is spiral intentionally, then we have to keep it that way. But if the original is circuitous because of the author’s poor command of language, then we have to do away with those redundant parts.

Q: So you think that a translator has the right to do so?

A: It has to be so. Otherwise, the target readers will have difficulty in understanding the translated works. In translating Gu Hua’s *A Small Town Called Hibiscus*, we cut out about one fourth to one third of the original.

Q: When you plan to delete some parts in the original, do you have to consult with the author?

A: Yes. Usually, the author will agree on our doing so because they want their works to have more readers. All a translator wants is let the target readers understand clearly and fully.

Q: When it comes to style, what are your ideas? Can style be translated?

A: Works can be flowery, elegant, circuitous, simple, plain, etc. A good translator will try to keep the original style as best as he can. But this can only be achieved to some extent. Style cannot be fully translated.

Q: Do you think it is necessary to keep the rhyme in translating poetry?

A: Keeping the rhyme is secondary to keeping the meaning. We are dealing with a different culture when translating from one language into another. There are some translators in China today who think that Chinese poetry is very good and so everything, including the rhyme, should be kept when they translate these poems. It is impossible to do so. For example, when translating into Chinese “To be or not to be, that is the question” in Shakespeare’s Hamlet, a translator once tried very hard to keep the original iambic in Chinese. Finally, he failed. The same is true when translating Tang poems and Song Ci. So keeping the rhyme is not as important as
keeping the meaning.
If you are translating Chinese ballads that are strikingly rhymed, then you may try to make your translation partly rhymed.

Q: How do you bring across figures of speech from Chinese?

A: Our strategy is to try to find a corresponding expression in English. First of all, translation is only an art. For example, we have an idiom “一箭雙雕” in Chinese. In English, there is a similar expression, “To kill two birds with one stone.” When translating this idiom, we first make sure whether this is used in isolation from “箭” and “雕.” If this is used in isolation, then we can replace it with “To kill two birds with one stone.” If, however, we find that “箭” and “雕” are mentioned in the context, then we will try to keep the original image (and translate it as “To kill two hawks with one arrow”).

Q: Have you had any difficulties in expressing yourselves?

A: Of course, yes. Yan Fu, a great translator, once said, “I have to consider 10 to 30 days for the translation of one term or name.” When we come across such problems, we have to rack our brains to solve them. For example, when we translated Liang Bin’s 紅旗譜, we knew this title means “Keeping the Tradition of Revolution.” That will do for the English title. But we also wanted to keep the image of 紅旗 (the Red Flag) and the meaning of譜(family record). So after much deliberation, we decided that the English version should be entitled “Keep the Red Flag Flying.” We thought we had reached a compromise by keeping some balance between the two parts. Otherwise, the target readers would find it puzzling if it had been translated as “Red Banner, Family Record.”

Q: Then can you say something about the principles that a translator should abide by?

A: First, he should be faithful to the original and make a distinction between what is his own and what is copied from other people’s work. No overstatement and no self-importance should be allowed. Translation is only an art.

Q: It is said that a good translator should be both bilingual and bicultural. Do you think so? In your opinion, what is required of a good translator?

A: Yes. A good translator should be proficient in at least two different languages and cultures.

Q: Is it better to translate on one’s own or to work in a team?

A: Generally, people would prefer to work alone. But Gladys and I are a couple and we both know two different languages. We have cooperated quite well. If you want to work in a team, you must be team-spirited. Otherwise, there will be arguments. For example, Lin Shu didn’t know foreign languages at all but managed to translate so many foreign novels. He was successful because he could cooperate with his good friends who knew these foreign languages.

Q: When you translated with Gladys, there could be differences in understanding because of your different backgrounds. Then who usually won in the arguments?

A: There were many times when we didn’t see eye to eye. But we often negotiated until we could reach an agreement. Usually, she would listen to me because I could understand Chinese better, especially classical Chinese.

Q: When you were Chief Editor of Chinese Literature, how did you manage the contributions and their quality?

A: Well, the Foreign Languages Press was cooperating with the Chinese Writers’ Union then. Contributions were based on their recommendations. For example, Ding Ling’s The Sun Shines over the Sanggan River, He Jingzhi’s The White-Haired Girl, and Zhou Li-bo’s The Hurricane were all recommended. Later, although the cooperation was not
that close, we had to consult with the Chinese Writers’ Union and the National Association of Writers and Artists. Except for the classics, we didn’t have any say in the contributions. Even when I was translating the classics, I had to listen to the editors. But when I became the editor, I could have my say and enjoyed more freedom.

Q: What are your responsibilities as Chief Editor?
A: Well, I had to take full responsibility for the issues. If there was any trouble, I would have to deal with it and take the blame.

Q: Do you think translation theories can guide practice?
A: Perhaps so. But to me, to put it in a simple way, faithfulness and expressiveness are enough. When we talk about elegance, I think everyone should try to be elegant in his writing, not necessarily in translation.

Q: You also have some creative writings. Do you think there is some connection between your writing and translation?
A: No. I have miscellaneous interests and have taken up many things, such as editing and publishing newspapers and magazines, and writing doggerels, articles, and novels. I don’t see any connection between my writing and translations. Maybe to others, there is.

Q: What advice can you give, from your own experience, to those who want to devote themselves to literary translation?
A: All they have to do is be faithful. Never exaggerate.

Q: In the Foreign Languages Press, for one Chinese novel, sometimes there might be translations in several languages. Did those translators of other foreign languages refer to your English translation?
A: Yes. The reason is that translators of other foreign languages in the Press were usually not good at Chinese. But most of them knew English. At that time, the English version was generally the first one to get published. Then they would base their translations on the English version. For example, after A Dream of Red Mansions was published, the Spanish and Burmese translations were published, based on the English version.

Q: What is your attitude to the original and its author?
A: Most of my translations are classics. There is no way for me to know what kind of people their authors were. But I like Lu Xun very much.

Q: What is your attitude toward the target readers? Your aim in translation is to let them understand the novel and have some ideas of the Chinese culture. Is this the case?
A: Yes.

Q: How do you know what kind of translations the readers of English would like?
A: As an editor, I have to think about this. When I was in charge of the Panda Books, I chose Beijing Legends by a very old writer. I did that because I knew Beijing is very attractive to many foreign readers.

Q: How have social, political, and economic forces influenced your translation?
A: Well, I should say that they have had a very great influence on my work.

Q: Will there be differences when a translator translates the same novel at different times?
A: The language may be different. But the content should be the same.

Q: Will there be differences when different transla-
tors translate the same novel at the same time?

A: Yes. A good translator should not plagiarize, and he should have his own style. For example, when asked to write a poem on the subject “Chrysanthemum,” a group of people will produce different poems.

Q: Do you think there could be a standard translation?

A: No, such a translation could hardly exist. There might be several translations for one novel, each with its own merits. But there have been very few translations of Chinese literary works, so it is hard to say.

Q: What are your most satisfactory translations?

A: A Dream of the Red Mansions, The Scholars, The Courtesan’s Jewel Box, etc. Altogether, about seven to eight of them.

Q: Do you think it necessary to make improvements to your translations?

A: Yes, I think it is necessary to make some corrections to my translation of Lu Xun’s A Brief History of Chinese Fiction. It was during the Great Leap Forward when we translated this. We were required to translate a certain number of words every day. I didn’t have the time to type, so I had to dictate and Gladys typed, because she could do it faster. Thus, we finished it in 10 days and had it published. This is too hasty. I think there is much room for improvement. One has to study the original very closely before translating.

Q: After you retired in 1982, what have you done in translation?

A: After I retired, I still acted as Chief Editor of Chinese Literature for several years. Then from 1989 on, I have not translated any works.

Q: In China today, there has been an argument as to whether there is an independent discipline called Translatology or Translation Studies. What is your opinion?

A: In my opinion, I think translation is only an art. But of course, you can call it a “science.” A “science” can be further divided, either broadly or not, into many subdisciplines. For example, “physics” can now easily be divided into a lot of disciplines. When you have studied something for some time, you will have some ideas. If you summarize these ideas, you can call it a “science.” It depends on you whether to call it a “science” or not. Everything can become a “science.” For example, in jade-carving and cloisonné manufacturing, you may come up with many strategies and approaches, the sum of which can be called a “science.”

Q: Before you, some other people had translated Liaozhai and Hongloumeng. Did you read and refer to them when you translated these novels?

A: I read them, but that was only for fun and long before I decided to translate these books.

Q: How many awards have you received?

A: I don’t remember.

Q: Compared with your work from Chinese into English, how do you think about your work from foreign languages into Chinese?

A: I should say that I am satisfied with my work in this respect.

Q: We can see you are an adviser of many organizations and publications. What do you think of that?

A: I don’t mind my name being used by others. But it is not very appropriate for them to use my name when I have not done anything for them. However, I am happy to be an adviser for the Chinese Writers’ Union, the Central Committee of the Kuomintang Revolutionary Committee, etc., because I have done something for such organizations. They elected me as an adviser to express their thanks for my work. It is not very honest for some organizations to claim
that they have me as their adviser. But I don’t have
the time and energy to correct this.

Q: Just now, you mentioned that a translator should
be faithful to the original. But when you translated
Tang and Song poetry, you didn’t try to make your
translation rhymed. Why?

A: That is because of the differences in the two cul-
tures. Not all English poems are rhymed. For exam-
ple, poems of the Anglo-Saxon era do not rhyme,
such as Beowulf. Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales are
rhymed. Different genres may have different patterns
of rhyme. For example, the patterns of rhyme in son-
nets could be this way or that way. Each line in a
Tang poem may be composed of 5 or 7 characters.
But you cannot translate it into an English line of 5
or 7 words. The prosody of different languages is dif-
ferent. If you strive for rhyme for rhyme’s sake, the
English translation would sound very ridiculous. The
original Chinese poem may be about something seri-
ous, but if your translation turns it into something
like doggerel and loses some of the original flavor,
then that translation is a failure.

Q: So some theorists in translation are talking
about whether the author of the original should
move toward the target reader or the target reader
should move toward the original.

A: In my opinion, the original work should go close
to the target reader. It is impossible and unnecessary
to ask all the target readers to learn and master
Chinese. In fact, the aim of translation is to let those
foreigners who don’t know Chinese read and learn
something about the Chinese literature and culture.
So there is no need to talk about the target readers
moving toward the original. If there were such a
need, then teach them Chinese and ask them to read
the original. In this case, translation is no long neces-
sary.

Q: And then readership will be greatly restricted.

A: Yes.
TRANSLATION REVIEW

Murasaki Shikibu
THE TALE OF GENJI
Newly Translated by Royall Tyler
The first complete new translation in 25 years of the Japanese masterpiece—beautifully packaged in a two-volume set with a slipcase.
Viking 1,200 pp. 0-670-03020-1 $60.00

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SAINT AUGUSTINE’S CHILDHOOD
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Garry Wills
“An exacting—and exciting—new translation and discussion.”
—Kirkus Reviews (starred).
Viking 208 pp. 0-670-03001-5 $23.95

Miguel de Cervantes
DON QUIXOTE
Newly Translated with an Introduction by Roberto Gonzalez Echevarriá
“This new translation...is extremely good. It makes Don Quixote funny and readable without obtrusively modernizing it.”
—The Times Literary Supplement.
Penguin Classic 944 pp. 0-14-044804-7 $13.00

THE STORY OF MY LIFE
Newly Translated by Stephen Sartarelli and Sophie Hawkes
Edited with an Introduction by Gilberto Pizzamiglio
Penguin Classic 576 pp. 0-14-043915-3 $15.00

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The adage “traduttore traditore” addressed generally to translation applies in extremis to plays, because translators of drama frequently feel driven to commit instances of petty or high treason against the original text. In reality, these are not so much acts of sedition as crimes of passion: after all, translating plays is unquestionably a labor of love.

Like much true love, it is also frequently unrequited or taken for granted, and its devotions usually escape notice by everyone except the occasional malcontent who saw Le bourgeois gentilhomme last season in Paris and, now that was Molière, sans doute, whereas what we saw last night, well, obviously, a lot was lost in the translation!

Of course any Shakespeare-in-the-Park is equally likely to provoke the same disgruntlement: two seasons ago upon-the-Avon, the same curmudgeon undoubtedly saw a splendid Midsummer and now that was Shakespeare! In this case, however, since the usual suspects aren’t around, the blame devolves onto the director, actors, designers, or the overall waywardness of American theater.

Obviously both productions involve acts of interpretation, a point not lost on Robert Wechsler, whose recent book on translation is entitled Performing Without a Stage, but whereas Shakespeare’s words had “merely” to travel from page to stage, Molière’s had to move from tongue to tongue as well. Such long voyages require a very tight ship, which is why more of the original is typically jettisoned as translators resort to increasingly drastic measures to keep afloat between the Scylla of fidelity and the Charybdis of stageworthy English. The lines need to speak as well as be spoken; they should ring true both within the context of the play and in the ears of the receivers.

In case the translator proves less than resolute in deciding what should stay and what should go, the director or even the actors will likely show no such hesitation and modify as they deem fit. This is not simply callous or cavalier disdain toward intellectual property; it is the presenters’ duty to convey their concept as clearly as possible and to keep the audience on the edge of their seats while so doing. Edits and amendments that would be unthinkable with poetry or prose are frequently necessary with drama. No matter what the original language, whole lines, scenes, and characters are often cut and dialogues reshaped to fit the production, unless the author or the author’s agent intervenes, as has famously happened with works by Samuel Beckett.

Plays in translation require still more reshaping, because the potential discrepancies between original text and final recipient are generally greater than in other writing. Translators and presenters alike must cope with a shifting cultural context, which applies to the style of the performance as well as the substance of the play: what passes for passion in Krakow may read as schmaltz in San Francisco, and a play that runs an hour in Cincinnati will likely last 90 minutes in Berlin and twice that in Moscow. An Afternoon in Creve Coeur sounds very concrete in St. Louis but somewhat more abstract in Kyoto. Local traditions of acting and directing, the social status of the theater, the presence of state or market censorship, the length of rehearsals, and the clout of various agents all affect what gets said on stage and how it is received.

How it gets said, though, is the translator’s special art.

All translation requires first hearing a voice in one language and then impersonating it in another. Of course, most stage works have several voices, each revealing aspects of character, social background, and class. There may be genuine regional speech, as in plays by de Filippo or Kroetz, or else invented dialects as in Brecht’s Mother Courage. Rojas’ La Celestina is rife with forms now considered archaic, and works by Mayakovsky or Witkacy sparkle with futuristic neologisms.

The problem of translating social class and the related issue of conveying formal versus informal speech are extremely difficult to solve using American English, although this is a tribute to our...
democracy. The British have an easier time producing Chekhov, in large part because their English remains so heavily class-coded. Meanwhile, on this side of the Atlantic, theater companies frequently attempt to convey class by using faux aristocratic accents based on a generic stage British, a ploy more likely to backfire than hit the mark. Regionalisms, too, work better in England because Britain has so many true dialects, whereas having Woyzeck speak Gullah will likely raise more issues than it solves.

A further difficulty stems from the intrinsically ephemeral nature of performance. Sitting in the house, the audience has just one chance to register what’s going on: no pages to flip, no rewind, no instant replay. And that beautiful phrase you so toiled to achieve can vanish in a cough or be cut by one missed cue.

Finally, the translator should resist the temptation (which has proven the bane even of some dramaturgs and literary managers who should know better) of reading playscripts as final texts rather than scores for performance. In so doing, he or she may avoid the literariness that impairs so many translations.

Such are the pitfalls lying in wait for the unwary. As if these weren’t deterrents enough to dissuade all but the most intrepid, the pay’s not great either, with royalties usually derived from the original author’s share of the take. And the take, generally speaking, is pretty meager, at least in the United States, where most theater is produced by nonprofit organizations struggling to make ends meet. Commissions are few and far between, and seldom qualify as munificent. The theaters’ inability to offer more incentive viciously reinforces the cycle that bars so much international drama from our stages.

So translators have little choice but to work under the assumption that true love is blind—especially to money.

Even if they can’t pay more, what theaters can do is involve the translator in the process as early as possible, from the moment the play is selected (too often, producers or directors don’t even consider the issue of translation until a few weeks before beginning rehearsals). Better still would be to consult with translators about plays that haven’t been translated at all: this would help lead the theaters to commission new translations of unknown works as opposed to retranslations of known plays. By treating the translator as a coauthor or designer, the director or dramaturg can help ensure that the translation will reflect the concept of the production, and vice versa. Early, clear, and frequent communication even in matters as seemingly trivial as script formatting will save substantial time and peoplepower.

As a case in point, I would like to refer to a translation I did of Brecht’s play In the Jungle of the City. This came about as a commission: in 1998, Bertolt Brecht would have turned 100, and theaters around the world celebrated by producing many of his plays: 7 Stages of Atlanta received support from the local Goethe Institute to mount a production of Jungle with a German director and scenographer. After consulting the extant published translations, the producers hired me to create a new English version that would sound more contemporary, more American, and would be more “actable.” (The availability or unavailability of playscripts in translation calls for a separate article.)

My own goal was to present a clearly understandable text that would capture the energy of the fight that is the play’s central metaphor, as well as the poetry that is its hallmark. It was clear that for our audience in Atlanta, certain themes—particularly allusions to race and instances of racism—would resonate differently than they would in Germany, either in Brecht’s time or today.

One of the first puzzles I needed to solve involved the protagonist Garga’s penchant for quoting Rimbaud, a task that led me to check the original source. Comparing the German with the French, I discovered that Garga’s version of Rimbaud bore an uncanny resemblance to Brecht, who was obviously more interested in capturing the soul of the passages than in reproducing them word-for-word, a guideline I determined to follow with absolute fidelity.

Performing the play in the United States made the Chicago setting more tangibly realistic, just as it made the idea of sailing straight from Lake Michigan to Tahiti more comically surreal. References to the flatlands or prairie evoke more and different associations from American audiences than they would from
German theatergoers: the uncrowded countryside is marked in the play by its very absence and serves as a utopian counterpart to the city, an idea I was able to strengthen by referring to the Gargas’ former “Haus im flachen land” as their “little house on the prairie.”

A similar opportunity for playfulness came in the first scene, set in a Lending Library, where the character called Worm picks out a book at random and begins reading: the literal citation would be “The skies were black, clouds were flying east.” This I changed to a readily recognizable passage from Dickens—perfectly logical given the time and place—that also served to foreshadow the last line of the play, “Es war die beste Zeit,” felicitously rendered as “It was the best of times.” Later on, in Scene Nine, the original Salvation Army minister borrows his “last words” from Frederick the Great: I risked adding anachronism to Brecht’s numerous anatopisms by quoting Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., to further underscore the issues of racism explored in the piece and help move the text into the conceptual context of our production in Atlanta. This prolepsis notwithstanding, I was generally concerned to convey the flavor of the 1920s, especially where capturing the sights and sounds of the city itself. The Fleischkarren of the original became “Butcher boys,” after consultation with people who remembered them and who also vetted various slang expressions.

Any financial reward was minimal, to say the least. As expected, the Brecht estate offered ironclad terms of contract in matters of rights and royalties (reserving for the estate all of the former and much of the latter), all of which were scrupulously adhered to. The theater couldn’t afford much in the way of commission, but they did arrange for me to meet with the director early on, and we remained in touch throughout the rehearsal process. They also flew me out for the opening.

Did I like what I saw? I’m sure I would have staged it differently (some years ago I directed a play…now that was Brecht!); but the performance did help me keep my eyes open to the number of interpretations a dramatic text may inspire. Which is one reason we should translate warily, lest we become blinded by our passion: after all, it was love that once translated Bottom…into an ass.
TRANSLATING FOR FILM: CREATING THE SUBTITLES FOR SYLVIO BACK’S “CRUZ E SOUSA: THE BANISHED POET” or DESEXÍLIO EM INGLÊS DO POETA DO DESTERRO

By Steven F. White

By the time I had finished creating the English subtitles for Sylvio Back’s film “Cruz e Sousa: O Poeta do Desterro” (1999), I had the uncanny feeling that João da Cruz e Sousa had translated me into a mysterious and powerful language I had never seen before. My sense of relief at having finished my work before what I thought would be an impossible deadline (I was given three months to complete the project) was eclipsed by the joy at having undone in English, and in conjunction with a team of translators laboring in Spanish and French, Cruz e Sousa’s one hundred years of solitude in the Portuguese language. How could such a marvelous poet have been unknown and in exile from the rest of the literary world for so long? This isolation is doubly ironic in that Cruz e Sousa lived much of his short life (he died of tuberculosis at the age of 36) on an island in southern Brazil that used to be called Desterro (which means exile) and is now known as Santa Catarina, whose main city is Florianópolis.

Although it has been said that translation is “an impossible transubstantiation” or “a resurrection, but without the body,” I was certain when I saw the final version of the film with the English subtitles that Sylvio Back, through the actor Kadu Carneiro’s body, voice, and gestures, had somehow managed to embody the spirit of Cruz e Sousa in the perfect medium for the twenty-first century—and this is especially fitting in that the poet died in 1898, the same year that marked the beginning of Brazilian cinema. Perhaps my work on Back’s film (a construct of a life perforce historical and fictive shot through with narrative visual re-creations), is really a translation of a translation. But herein resides the director’s genius and radical good sense: Cruz e Sousa the poet speaks in his own words, by means of his poems and personal letters. Sylvio Back describes the structure of the film as a biographical interlinking of what he calls “34 visual stanzas.”

One of these stanzas, Sequence II, in which Kadu Carneiro watches himself in a mirror as he rehearses his lines from Cruz e Sousa’s poem “O Assinalado” (“Marked for Greatness”) contains, for me, a profound metaphor for translation itself that may, in fact, have helped me overcome many challenges, both inter- and intralingual, as I worked on the English version of the screenplay. Certainly there is a conscious awareness in this sequence of the film as a process, reminiscent of, say, the Spanish director Carlos Saura and so many others. But the streak of sacrificial blood that suddenly appears on the actor’s face facilitates another kind of process, equally kinetic, but with a religious significance in that it enables Carneiro to incorporate in his body (as if he were a horse to be mounted by a particular god from the Yoruban pantheon) the poet he portrays in the film. The babalorixá (candomblé priest) foresees Cruz e Sousa’s designated future of hardship by means of the jogo de búzios (the casting of cowry shells) and the 16 eyes of Ifá, the Yoruban god associated with divination. The marginality of madness in the Euro-Brazilian context of “Marked for Greatness” is thus transformed into the integrative ceremonial order of Afro-Brazilian religion.

Cruz e Sousa

You’re the madman of immortal madness,
The madman for whom madness reigns supreme.
In your black shackles of this World, you scream,
Enchained in the most outrageous Sadness.

You’re the Poet, marked for Greatness by fate.
There’s empty space for you to populate
With plural beauty you make eternal.

In Nature’s fullness that will never die,
All the bold forces of life justify
The crazed seizures that make you immortal.

Candomblé Priest

João, my son, Ifá, the god of divination, tells me that no suffering in this life is for naught. No tear is lost. Human life, João, is barely a preparation for the true life. There is no tear that God does not perceive, João. Who has never cried a secret tear? God awaits each one for eternity. And so, João, you will reap the richness and greatness of your poems made from pain and sorrow. Let the African gods, João, give you the strength to face the hardships you meet on the road of your life. Let the benevolent forces bless you, my son. And let Olorum bring you peace and tranquility on your journeys. Axé.

[Cruz e Sousa
Tu és o louco da imortal loucura./O louco da loucura mais suprema./A Terra é sempre a tua negra algema./Prende-te nela a extrema Desventura./Tu és o Poeta, o grande Assinalado/Que povoas o mundo despovoado./De belezas eternas, pouco a pouco./Na Natureza prodigiosa e rica/Toda a audácia dos nervos justifica/ Os teus espasmos imortais de louco!

Babalorixá
João, meu filho, o babalaô falou através de Ifá (adivinho), que nenhum sofrimento nesta vida é vão. Nenhuma lágrima se perde. A vida humana, João, é apenas uma preparação para a verdadeira vida. Não há uma lágrima que Deus não veja, João. Quem não chora a sua lágrima secreta? Deus as guarda por toda a eternidade. Assim, João, tirarás da dor e do sofri-mento a riqueza e a grandeza de teus poemas. Que os orixás, João, te dêem forças pelas provações e pela tua caminhada nesta vida. Que todas as forças benéficas te abençoem, meu filho. E que Olorum te dê paz e tranqüilidade nos teus caminhos. Axé.]

The prerequisite, of course, for a film understood as a kind of xirê, a celebration by means of visitation and possession, is the padê, the invocation of Exú, the messenger, who informs the gods that it is Cruz e Sousa himself, not Kadu Carneiro, sitting in a trance on celluloid ground with sacred leaves in a terreiro (candomblé temple) that pulses with the rhythms of the atabaques (sacred drums) and collective singing. I came to understand Exú, in this sense, as the orixá (god) of translators, a messenger between the Portuguese and English languages.

Exú represents the dynamic continuum between total incomprehension and complete revelation (which resembles, perhaps, the two poles of translation embodied in the aftermath of Babel at one end of the spectrum and the Pentecostal tongues of flame at the other). Without Exú, how can the translator struggle with the linguistic forces of permanence and change? How can communication exist? How can language retain its boundary-transforming powers? As I worked on the translation, I saw Exú at the crossroads of meaning, opening and closing the way. Exú, I began to realize, facilitates the common ground of disparate languages and the connections between humanity’s diverse speech communities. In short, what I found in Exú was a kind of translation-al axê, a vital force, a transgressive harmony linked to the swarm of rhymes and rhythms that I needed to discover in English in order to reveal the music of Cruz e Sousa’s poetry in Portuguese. Ultimately, my role as a translator was to create the visual belief system of subtitles so that an international audience might move beyond a simple willing suspension of disbelief and be utterly convinced by the poetry in Sylvio Back’s film.

In a way, I had begun translating Cruz e Sousa in 1993-94 by living in Desterro (Florianópolis) on a sabbatical leave from St. Lawrence University, where I had the chance to meet Zahidé de Muzart, one of Cruz e Sousa’s most fervent contemporary supporters, and to teach a course on translation with Walter Carlos Costa at the Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina. No doubt I already had started to assimilate the landscape of the poet, the one that appears in the film: I remember, for example, reading Cruz e Sousa’s last sonnets one beautiful after-
noon at sunset on the Praia Moçambique. At the end of my stay in Brazil, while visiting Rio de Janeiro, I spoke with the thoroughly impressive poet-translator Paulo Henriques Brito, who shocked me with his generosity when he gave me the original 1966 recording of “Os Afro-Sambas” by Baden Powell and Vinicius de Moraes (an LP with a deeply syncretic spirit—not entirely unlike “O Poeta do Desterro”—that I had been seeking all year in Brazil) as a present. Five years later, it was through Paulo that Sylvio Back found me in Madrid, where I was living at the time, and proposed the collaboration.

It was with a certain trepidation that I began negotiating the points of the contract with the Brazilian director. I drew on the expertise of acquaintances who knew the film industry in the United States and Colombia as well as the broadcast medium in the U. S. advertising business to establish a flat fee for the job to be paid upon satisfactory completion of the translation. I learned, too, about the tremendous number of variables in terms of financing films in Brazil. For example, the costs of creating the subtitles in English, Spanish and French would be covered by a regional governmental office (in conjunction with a state-owned company that produced electricity) interested in promoting tourism on the island whose beautiful landscapes were an integral part of the film.

I also learned that it is important to insist on a contract so that certain points can be negotiated, including: retaining the copyright of the translation in the translator’s name; establishing how the translation will be used as subtitles and marketed as film, video, and DVD; delineating whether or not the translation will appear in book form as a published screenplay; stipulating that the translator’s name must appear in the credits of the film and on the title page of any book publication; providing a gratis VHS copy of the subtitled film as well as complimentary copies of the published work; and facilitating access to proofs of the text as subtitles and also as page proofs for the book.

I discovered that the point of making sure to have the right to review the actual text that will appear as the subtitles is extremely important. Apparently, although I submitted an electronic version of the translation, someone needed to retype the manuscript for use in the subtitling machine. Consequently, in the text generated by this process, there were many errors that I had a chance to correct that did not exist in the version I submitted initially to the director. It made me remember seeing certain foreign films and cringing at all the typographical errors in the subtitles, an unsettling experience that certainly does not inspire viewer confidence. The truth is that I enjoyed working with the printed text generated by the subtitling machine because I had a clear idea as to the exact words that would be in each frame of the film. In the left hand margin, the subtitle number appeared in conjunction with the elapsed time of the film (with the precision of times that one associates with Olympic runners!). In addition to my being able to correct spelling mistakes, there was also some leeway for me to adjust the line breaks of the poems and how the subtitle as verse would actually appear on the screen.

Naturally, any process of negotiation depends on the goodwill of all parties. Fortunately, the director was absolutely professional and helpful throughout the entire process, and I was very satisfied with the agreements we reached. After signing the contract, however, panicked by the scope of the project that I had accepted, I went to see “Shakespeare in Love” (in English, with Spanish subtitles in Madrid), with a very specific purpose and was greatly relieved to see how the rather dense, poetic text of the screenplay of this film fit on the screen and how little was lost in translation. After this, it was simply a question of learning some technical vocabulary (such as Off Screen and Voice Off) and of putting in the long hours needed to conserve in my English version as many of the formal qualities of Cruz e Sousa’s poetry as possible.

The temporal tightrope I walked as a translator consisted of creating in English an identity poetics that balanced an aesthetic sensibility clearly from the 19th century with a political sensibility regarding racism in Brazil that seemed strikingly contemporary. Two things confirmed this impression as I worked. One was a fortuitous visit to the Musée D’Orsay in Paris, where I saw a luminous, enigmat-
ic, symbol- and reverie-filled exhibit of paintings by artists such as Redon, Burne-Jones, Lévy-Dharmer, and Khnopff that resonated so deeply with certain poems by Cruz e Sousa such as “Antifona” (“Antiphon”), “Grande Amor” (“Great Love”), and “Illusões Mortas” (“Dead Illusions”). But there are also other, fiercer poems by Cruz e Sousa (who was the son of slaves and the victim of racism in Brazil), such as “O Emparedado” (“Trapped”), “Litania dos Pobres” (“Litany of the Poor”), and “Escravocratas” (“Slave Lords”), that found their echo in the prose and poetry that I was reading and translating by new black Brazilian writers such as Edmilson de Almeida Pereira, Cuti, Ronald Augusto, Ricardo Aleixo, Lepê Correia, and others.

Sylvio Back’s controversial film “Cruz e Sousa: O Poeta do Desterro,” along with the recent quadrilingual edition of the film’s screenplay published by 7 Letras in Rio de Janeiro, will resurrect and even globalize a poet whose complex, multidimensional racial and sexual identity in the 19th century may not be entirely in keeping with the way some viewers, readers, and political activists might mold him to fit their contemporary needs.

The film reminds us, however, that underlying the Euro-Brazilian voice of Cruz e Sousa’s Symbolism, so important to the literary history of his country and to the entire Portuguese language, is another voice, that of his fiancée Pedra Antióquia, calling the poet back to his trans-Atlantic African heritage, singing to him in Yoruba of love and the risks of existence as emblemized by her necklace not of cowry shells but of human skulls.

Cruz e Sousa

You are from the source, from the secret sea,
From unfamiliar surf, where the line seems
To catch the vessel in a net of dreams
And leaves it rocking on water, empty.

From the sea comes your sparkling sympathy,
Your agitated sleep and your features:
The look of menacing feral creatures
In eyes like waves that are dark and stormy.

From an unfathomed violet ideal
You surge from the viscous water and wheel
Like a moon in heavy fog bursting free.

Your flesh contains a flowering of vines,
Virgin saltwater-songs, the day’s first signs,
And the sharp smells of a sargasso sea.

Pedra Antióquia

If you want to be my lover
First consult your head

If you want to get married
First consult your head

If you want money
First consult your head

If you want to build a house
First consult your head

If you want to be happy
First consult your head

O, head! Make good things come to me!

[Cruz e Sousa
És da origem do mar, vens do secreto./Do estranho mar espumaroso e fio/Que põe rede de sonhos ao navio,/E o deixa balouçar, na vaga, inquieto./Possuis do mar o deslumbrante afeto,/As dormências nervosas e o sombrio/E torvo aspecto aterrador, bravio/Das ondas no atro e proceloso aspecto./Num fundo ideal de púrpuras e rosas/Surge das águas mucilaginosas/Como a lua entre a névoa dos espaços…/Trazes na carne o eflorescer das vinhas./Auroras, virgens músicas marinhas./Acres aromas de algas e sargãos…

Translation Review
Pedra Antióquia
Se você quiser ser meu amado/Pergunte primeiro à sua cabeça/Se você quer casamento/Pergunte primeiro à sua cabeça/Se você quiser ter dinheiro/Pergunte primeiro à sua cabeça/Se você quiser construir uma casa/Pergunte primeiro à sua cabeça/Se você quiser ser feliz/Pergunte primeiro à sua cabeça/Oh! cabeça! Cabeça faça coisas boas chegarem a mim!]

Pedra speaks to João about their potential life together in keeping with the liturgical language of Afro-Brazilian religions. One must consult the Ori, because it is in the head that a particular god exercises control over traits, desires, and words that are both human and divine. These are the convergences that I sought to understand and preserve through translation when João da Cruz e Sousa became the owner of my head.
BIG RAT, BIG RAT:
MULTIPLE TRANSLATIONS OF A CHINESE POEM

By John Balcom

It is a commonplace notion that each generation must produce its own translation of an important poetic text. One reason for this is that the problems of verse translation are, at any given period, one facet of the larger general problem of verse composition. Taste, and the notion of what constitutes a poem, can and do change over time. With this in mind, I would like to examine six different translations of a single poem from the *Book of Songs*, 詩經, China’s earliest anthology of poetry. The translations cover a period of approximately 100 years, beginning with those of James Legge and William Jennings in the 19th century, followed by those of Arthur Waley, Bernard Karlgren, Ezra Pound, and Burton Watson in the 20th century.

For the Chinese, the *Book of Songs* holds the equivalent position of importance and primacy that Homer holds for the West. It is both poetry and, as one of the Confucian classics, scripture. The *Book of Songs* is an anthology of 305 poems of varying lengths, drawn from various levels of Zhou dynasty (1122–249 B.C.) society. It is divided into four sections: the airs of the states, or folk songs collected from among the common people of the 15 states; the minor odes, which focus more on the life of the nobility; the major odes, which interweave historical and legendary materials of the Zhou state into the concerns of the aristocratic society; and the hymns, which are somber, liturgical texts associated with the royal houses of the Zhou and Shang and the state of Lu (the home of Confucius). The hymns are among the oldest texts in the anthology and may date back to as early as 1000 B.C.

According to tradition as recorded in the *Records of the Grand Historian*, 史記, the *Book of Songs* was compiled by Confucius himself. It is said that the Sage began with more than 3000 compositions, editing and selecting the best until he arrived at what is today known as the *Book of Songs*. Today, the history of the text, its origins and formulation, is considerably more complex.

In terms of form, the songs employ a line made up of four characters, though other line lengths do occur. One line is generally a complete syntactic unit. The lines are arranged in stanzas of four, six, or eight lines. Rhyme is common and usually used at the end of even-numbered lines, but internal rhyme and alliteration also are used. The airs tend to be highly compressed and elliptical; they also employ a great deal of repetition. In general, the anthology is quite economical in expression.

I have chosen the 113th poem from the *Book of Songs*, the seventh in the “Airs of the State of Wei,” known as *shishu*, 碩鼠 (big rat[s]). The poem is a complaint about the oppression and heavy taxes extorted from the people by the government of Wei.

The Chinese text of the poem:

碩鼠碩鼠，無食我黍；
三歲貫女，
莫我肯德．
逝將去女，
適彼樂土；
樂土樂土，
爰得我所！

碩鼠碩鼠，
無食我麥；
三歲貫女，
莫我肯德．
逝將去女，
適彼樂國；
樂國樂國，
爰得我直！

碩鼠碩鼠，
無食我苗；
三歲貫女，
莫我肯勞．
逝將去女，
適彼樂郊；
This poem is fairly typical of the "Airs" section of the *Book of Songs* in that the poem consists of three stanzas, each of eight lines with four characters to each line, a very terse form. This particular poem falls under the rubric of bi, 賢 "metaphor," one of the three compositional techniques used in the "Airs" as defined by later commentators. This poem is considered metaphorical because the officials are compared to large rats. (The other two compositional techniques are fu, 賦 or narrative display, and xing, 興 or motif.)

In 1861, James Legge published the first complete translation the *Book of Songs* in English. Legge preached at the Union Church in Hong Kong for nearly 30 years before returning to England, where he was made the first Professor of Chinese at Oxford University. He is famous for having spent a lifetime translating the Confucian and Daoist classics. Here is his version of the poem:

Large rats, large rats, let us entreat
That you our millet will not eat.
But the large rats we mean are you,
With whom three years we’ve had to do,
And all that time have never known
One look of kindness on us thrown.
We take leave of Wei and you;
That happier land we long to view.
O happy land! O happy land!
There shall we learn to bless our fate.

Initially, Legge published a scholarly prose version of the *Book of Songs*; later, with the help of others, he produced a verse version for the non-specialist. This version in rhyming couplets is the sort of translation one would expect from late Victorian England. The meter is regular and the rhyme very intrusive, if not jarring to the ear. The eight-line stanzas of the original have become ten-line stanzas in translation: Legge pads his translation, fleshing out the meaning of the elliptical original. For some reason, he doesn’t think his reader capable of understanding the metaphorical function of the rats in the poem, and insists upon telling us that the rats are actually members of the government of Wei.

Another feature of this translation that will not find many takers today is the syntactic contortions to achieve the clunky rhymes. Most contemporary readers will spend a good deal of time retranslating Legge’s translation into modern English with normal syntax. Also, there is that 19th-century species of faux poetic language: "let us entreat," "we take our leave," "to you we wend." This sort of medievalism certainly fits the tastes of the day and lends a certain antiquated texture to the poem.

Another 19th-century rendition is that done by William Jennings, Vicar of Beedon and once Colonial Chaplain of St. John’s Cathedral, Hong Kong. He produced a complete translation of the *Book of Songs* for Sir John Lubbock’s Hundred Books series. His complete version was published in 1891. Jennings produced his translation after studying the original texts and a number of commentaries. He also availed himself of Legge’s scholarly prose version.

In the introduction, Jennings enumerates some of the problems facing the translator of the *Book of
A line consists regularly of four characters or monosyllabic words, often strong words, and pregnant with meaning in their collocation, defying equally terse translation….A great peculiarity is that almost every line is a sentence in itself, which is a source of great comfort amid all the difficulties that beset the translator at every turn….A remarkable peculiarity of style is this, that while in an English ballad we often find a refrain or chorus at the end of the verse, in Chinese there is something corresponding to that in the beginning—some allusion to natural objects, bearing figuratively upon the subject, and repeated perhaps with variations in most of the succeeding verses.3

In his introduction, Jennings also comments on the shortcomings of his predecessor’s metrical version:

It seems to be the general opinion, that in the metrical version which followed, in which he availed himself of coadjutors (not sinologists) in England and elsewhere, he has been far from equaling himself. In that version has been adopted the plan of making many difficult pieces intelligible by introducing into them (contrary to his expressed aim) phrases, and often several whole lines of explanatory matter which properly should be relegated to footnotes.4

Jennings sought to produce a verse translation more faithful to the original in terms of form and content than Legge’s. In other words, he wished to adhere to the scholarly and philological accuracy of a prose text while producing a verse translation. As a result, he does not add the explanatory padding that we saw in Legge, and he is often a bit more terse than Legge. Jennings’ translation:

Song of Farmers Driven Forth by Extortion

O monster rats! O monster rats!
Eat not our millets, we implore.
Three years we’ve borne with you,
And still our presence you ignore.
Now we abandon you,
And to yon pleasant lands repair.
O pleasant lands! O pleasant lands!
A refuge have we surely there.

O monster rats! O monster rats!
Devour not all our crops of wheat.
Three years we’ve borne with you,
Still with no mercy do we meet.
Now we abandon you,
And take to yon glad Land our flight.
O gladsome Land! O gladsome Land!
There justice shall we have, and right.

O monster rats! O monster rats!
Devour not all our springing grain.
Three years we’ve borne with you,
Nor heed you still our toil and pain.
Now we abandon you
For brighter plains that yonder lie.
O brighter plains! O brighter plains!
Whose, then, will be the constant cry?5

First of all, it should be noted that Jennings adds titles to his translations, something lacking in the original. (The poems are often referred to by the single most important image in the poem.) He also appends some explanatory notes to his translation. In the first, he informs the reader that the word “monster” means “huge” and that “the State officials had grown fat on their extortion, and were no less troublesome than rats.” And the “brighter plains” in the third stanza he says means “borders, frontiers.” Unlike Legge, Jennings has seen fit to relegate his explanations to footnotes. However, by maintaining a little bit of the terseness of the original, albeit within a late-Victorian translation, he has also created new problems. For example, he renders the fourth line of the first stanza as: “And still our presence you ignore.” Although it can be argued that
this is what the original says, the sense is off; the farmers are not being ignored, far from it, they are being taxed too heavily. They probably wish that the government officials would ignore them for a change. What the officials fail to take notice of is the plight of the people.

Jennings maintains the eight-line stanzas of the original, as well as a consistent rhyme scheme throughout the poem: xABABCxuC, with the end word of the seventh line rhyming internally on the same word in the sixth line. As Jennings points out in his introduction, the first line to each stanza functions as a refrain of sorts, and therefore he does not rhyme this first stanzic verse. Jennings seems to be a better versifier than Legge et al.—his rhymes are less intrusive, but he, too, twists English syntax for his rhymes. Another feature of Jennings’ version is his use of archaisms such as “yon,” “gladsome,” and “repair” to give the poem a more archaic flavor. He is perhaps justified; after all, he is translating China’s earliest poetic anthology. The use of the word “millet” in the first stanza with a plural suffix “s” added is also a bit odd.

These two 19th-century translators, as different as their versions are, do share certain similarities in their approaches to translation. Both insist upon using rhyme and, as a result, both twist the syntax of their verse. Secondly, both translators use archaisms, probably to heighten the poetic qualities of their renditions. They do differ in their views on explanatory translation, adding material to explain implied or suggested meanings not necessarily in the original text. To the contemporary ear, Jennings’ translation probably is to be preferred.

But it was in the 20th century that dramatic changes in the art of translation began to occur. In 1937, Arthur Waley published his translation of the Book of Songs and in 1954, a revised version. The entire translation was re-edited using Bernard Karlgren’s translations and notes, which appeared between 1942 and 1946. Waley is, of course, the justly famous translator of classical Chinese and Japanese literature. He was also the first translator of Chinese poetry to reject the intentional archaism of 19th-century translators and to situate his art within the broader context of early Anglo-American modernist discourse. In his translations, he consciously rejects an outmoded literariness and opts for 20th-century English and a situational and narrative realism one associates with the Imagist poets. By doing so, Waley basically set the standard for 20th-century translation of classical Chinese poetry. Waley’s translation:

Big rat, big rat,
Do not gobble our millet!
Three years we have slaved for you,
Yet you take no notice of us.
At last we are going to leave you
And go to that happy land;
Happy land, happy land,
Where we shall have our place.

Big rat, big rat,
Do not gobble our corn!
Three years we have slaved for you,
Yet you give us no credit.
At last we are going to leave you
And go to that happy kingdom;
Happy kingdom, happy kingdom,
Where we shall get our due.

Big rat, big rat,
Do not eat our rice-shoots!
Three years we have slaved for you.
Yet you did nothing to reward us.
At last we are going to leave you
And go to those happy borders;
Happy borders, happy borders
Where no sad songs are sung.

Waley’s version is a striking departure from what we are accustomed to reading from earlier translators. There is a directness and simplicity, if not limpidity, in his renditions that are absent from the 19th-century versions. Waley has forsaken rhyme and its concomitant syntactic distortion for normal colloquial syntax, achieving a tone closer to the original as well as a narrative freshness. His choice of words tends to be colloquial but descriptive: the word “gobble,” for instance; however, in places the words have lost something: his use of the word “corn” to
mean “grain,” for example. Waley’s translation of the Book of Songs is still considered by scholars to be a masterpiece of translation and some of his best work.

In 1950, the great Swedish sinologist Bernard Karlgren published his prose translation of the Book of Songs. Karlgren set out to produce a scholarly version with no literary pretensions. He provided the Chinese text, a romanized text including his phonetic reconstruction of the rhyme words. Karlgren’s text is meant to be used as a crib by students and scholars. His translation:

1. You shi-rats, you shi-rats(a), do not eat our millet! Three years we served you, but you have not been willing to (look at =) heed us; it has gone so far that we will leave you; we go to that happy land; oh, happy land, happy land! Then we shall find our place.

2. You shi-rats, you shi-rats, do not eat our wheat! Three years we have served you, but you have not been willing to be good to us; it has gone so far that we will leave you; we go to that happy country, happy country! Then we shall find our right.

3. You shi-rats, you shi-rats, do not eat our sprouting grain; three years we have served you, but you have not been willing to (recognize our toil=) reward us; it has gone so far that we will leave you; we go to those happy outlands, happy outlands, happy outlands! Who goes there to make long-drawn-out lamentations?

(a) Some kind of rodent.8

Karlgren’s translation, as we noted, makes no pretensions of being an artistic rendition. The value of his text lies in its ability to convey a sense of the simplicity of the original. His version has become the standard scholarly crib for all would-be sinologists. Professor Karlgren’s reading of the character shi 碧, is different from that of the other translators considered here. In most early commentaries and dictionaries, the character is normally glossed as simply meaning “big,” which is the meaning it carries today. However, Karlsgren’s interpretation is based on a gloss in the Examples of Refined Usage, 翔鶴 (3rd century BC), China’s earliest lexicographical work, where the character shi 碧 is identified with the homophonous morpheme shi, 鼠, which contains the graphs for rat, 鼠, and stone, 石, and which occurs in the Book of Changes, 易經, meaning “some kind of rodent.”9 Yet, given the logic of metaphor, a reading of the character as “big” clearly makes sense.

Perhaps the most striking translation of the Book of Songs—and I use the word translation in the broadest sense of the word—is that of Ezra Pound. Ezra Pound, of course, needs no introduction. One can say there is never a dull moment in Pound’s translation, but the reader would probably be more interested in reading his translations for the Pound they contain rather than as translations of a Chinese classic. Pound clearly brings to his translations all the concerns that one finds in Anglo-American modernist poetry. What Pound gives us is a real 20th-century version of the poem:

RATS,
Stone-head rats lay off our grain,
Three years pain,
Enough, enough, plus enough again.

More than enough from you, deaf you,
We’re about thru and ready to go
Where something will grow
Untaxed.
Good earth, good sown
And come into our own.

RATS,
Big rats, lay off our wheat,
Three years deceit,
And now we’re about ready to go
To Lo Kuo, happy, happy land, Lo Kuo, good earth
Where we can earn our worth.

RATS,
Stone-head rats, spare our new shoots,
Three years, no pay.
We’re about ready to move away
To some decent border town.
Good earth, good sown,
And make and end to this endless moan.¹⁰

The reader will at once be struck by Pound’s formal
and rhythmic experimentation everywhere evident in
this translation. First off, he uses an imagist tech-
nique in the word RATS in capitals. Visually, the use
of capital letters is a graphic way to emphasize the
size and alarm the speaker feels at the sight of the
officials. It is perhaps a good example of what
Pound called phanopoeia, or “throwing a visual
image on the mind,” a quality he found most strongly
exhibited in the Chinese written language.¹¹

Pound rejects the formal strictures of the original in
order to play with the rhythm of the poem and to
allow himself to emphasize certain words such as
“untaxed” in the first stanza. Other striking qualities
would be the use of the highly colloquial language
such as “lay off.”

But Pound’s version also suffers somewhat
from his own quirky theories about the Chinese lan-
guage as he inherited them from Earnest Fenollosa’s
The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for
Poetry, which he edited.¹² Fenollosa and Pound both
had the mistaken notion that Chinese is a picto-
graphic language and downplayed its more impor-
tant phonetic properties. For Pound, every Chinese
character was a picture to be interpreted, and therefore
his “stone-head rats.” What Pound has done in
this particular case is to disassemble the Chinese
character shi 石 and interpret it based on its parts. In
the Chinese we see the characters shishu 碼鼠, or
literally, “big rat(s).” Pound breaks the first charac-
ter down into its component parts: shi 石 or
“stone,” and ye 頭 or page. So where does he get
the word “head”? Using Fenollosa’s theories, he
makes an “intuitive” leap, associating the character
ye 頭 with another character containing the same
component: tou 頭, or “head.”

One other oddity is Pound’s reading of the two
characters 樂國 as “Lo Kuo.” Instead of reading the
characters as meaning something like happy or joyful
land, he seems to think that it is the actual name
of a state. One meaning of the character “Kuo”
(guo 国) is state. Regardless of lapses a sinologist
wouldn’t make, one can safely say that with Pound’s
translation there is never a dull moment.

The last version I would like to look at is that
by Burton Watson. Burton Watson is generally con-
sidered the most gifted translator of classical
Chinese texts in the second half of the 20th century.
As the poet W.S. Merwin has said, Watson continues
and extends the vein initiated by Arthur Waley.¹³
Watson’s work has more or less set the standard for
the translation of classical Chinese poetry in recent
decades. Watson, unlike the other translators, has
not made a complete translation of the Book of
Songs. His translation is part of a selection he did
for his The Columbia Book of Chinese Poetry: From
Early Times to the Thirteenth Century, published in
1984. His translation:

No. 113. Big Rat, Big Rat

(A complaint against rapacious officials.)

Big rat, big rat,
don’t eat my millet!
Three years I’ve served you
but you won’t care for me.
I’m going to leave you
and go to that happy land,
happy land, happy land
where I’ll find my place.

Big rat, big rat,
don’t eat my wheat!
Three years I’ve served you
but you do me no good.
I’m going to leave you
and go to that happy realm
happy realm, happy realm –
things will be right for me there.

Big rat, big rat,
don’t eat my sprouts!
Three years I’ve served you
but you give me no comfort.
I’m going to leave you
and go to those happy fields, 
happy fields, happy fields, 
who will moan there for long?14

Indeed, Watson does continue and extend the trend initiated by Waley; he too rejects rhyme, opting for free verse that better captures the spirit of the original. There is a conscious choice of monosyllabic and disyllabic words of Germanic origin as opposed to polysyllabic words of Latinate origin—a general trend in the United States in the latter half of the 20th century. The phonetic simplicity of the translation actually mirrors the monosyllabic simplicity of the original. Punctuation is used sparingly to reproduce the rhythm of American speech. Finally, the heavy use of contractions is also typical of the colloquial diction we find in so much of late 20th century American verse. What Watson offers the reader is a version of the poem in a contemporary American poetic idiom.

Watson also seems to have benefited from Karlgren’s version in that he handles the final verse as a question. One major difference in Watson’s translation is his use of the first person singular rather than first person plural that we saw in the other translations. In the Chinese, there is no pronoun, but English demands one. Watson simply visualizes the situation of the lyric voice in a different way from other translators and tends to make it more personal.

From the foregoing discussion, it is clearly apparent that the verse translation of any period is often bound up with the larger problem of verse composition in general. These concerns change with time, as do our notions of what constitutes a poem. The norms and demands of one time are clearly different, and perhaps nowhere so greatly as between the 19th and 20th centuries. Truly, each generation must produce its own translation of any major work.

Notes

5 William Jennings. p. 126.
7 Arthur Waley. p. 309.
9 A tip of the hat to my friend Goran Malmquist for this information.
11 Ezra Pound. ABC of Reading. p. 42.
12 Ezra Pound. ABC of Reading. p. 21.
STRIP IN UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA AD
MODERN ARABIC POETRY IN ENGLISH TRANSLATION: AN OVERVIEW OF SELECTED ANTHOLOGIES*

By Salih J. Altoma

It is generally recognized that poetry as the primary genre in Arabic literature has been only marginally represented in English translations and until recently has been largely ignored in studies dealing with Islam or the Arab world. A quick review of more than 2000 modern poems translated into English during this century indicates that only a small fraction (about fifty) of these poems were published before 1950, and in nearly all cases the translation was made by native speakers of Arabic. This is largely because earlier British and American Orientalists/Arabists tended to focus in their works on nonliterary aspects of Arabo-Islamic culture and thus failed to take active part in the translation of poetry or other Arabic literary genres. The only notable exception as far as modern poetry is concerned is Arthur Arberry, whose contributions to the translation of poetry (classical and modern) include his pioneering 1950 anthology.

As Arberry pointed out in his preface, the anthology was a joint attempt in which he and students from several Arab countries cooperated to produce a collection representative of Arabic poetry written from the 1920s to the 1940s. Arberry’s versified translations may strike readers of poetry as artificial and ineffective in achieving the poetic quality of the originals; but by choosing versification, he raised an important issue regarding the method to be followed in translating poetry. He obviously felt that his translations should reflect the poetic styles and techniques of the original poems. Apart from its stylistic flaws, Arberry’s anthology serves as a positive contribution to the translation of modern Arabic poetry for two reasons: its being the result of cooperation between Arabic- and English-speaking translators, and the broad scope it has maintained in terms of the poets and the countries represented (45 poets, 11 countries, and the two schools of Arab poets active in the United States and South America).

After the publication of Arberry’s anthology (1950) and until the early 1970s, slow but steady strides were made in the translation of Arabic poetry, particularly in the United States. However, the translations appeared mostly in journals and little magazines. It should be noted that despite these strides and the proliferation of Arabic studies in American and British institutions, no other anthology comparable to Arberry’s was published. It was only during the 1970s and 1980s that we begin to witness the publication of more significant and diversified anthologies of Arabic poetry in English translation. They were edited or undertaken not only in English-speaking countries (mainly the United Kingdom and United States) but also in several Arab countries, such as Egypt, Iraq, and Lebanon. The latter fact underlines the prominent role that Arab translators have continued to assume to ensure that Arabic poetry reach a wider audience and receive the recognition it deserves as part of world literature. Whether working alone or in cooperation with English-speaking translators, Arab translators (poets, scholars, and others) have contributed, though not always successfully, to most of the translations that are currently available (see, for example, Altoma 13–16).

Apart from the innumerable translated poems published in periodicals and in studies dealing with Arabic literature, there are now numerous anthologies, which represent the poetry of the postwar period. These can be classified into three categories: (1) general/Pan-Arab anthologies; (2) region- or country-oriented anthologies; and (3) anthologies of poets.

For the purpose of this survey, only representative anthologies of the first group will be examined in terms of their scope as well as their method of translation.
Khouri and Algar’s bilingual anthology (1974) offers a fine and reliable translation of 80 poems by 35 poets. The poetry selected represents mostly the post-1950 free verse and prose poem movements, but it also includes examples from the works of leading pre-1950 poets who were known for their innovations or departure from the classical tradition. Issa Boullata’s (1976) focuses on the former movement and captures, with remarkable skill, the spirit of the period (1950-1975) as manifested in the works of 22 poets. Both anthologies cover countries in which the new currents first emerged: Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, and the Sudan. Khouri’s collection includes, in addition, a noted romantic poet from Tunisia, al-Shabbi (1909–1934). Both anthologies, however, useful and reliable as they are, lack the poetic quality that only creative translators in the target language can ensure.

Jayyusi’s Project for Translation from Arabic (PROTA) has sought to address this problem by enlisting the contribution of English-speaking poets in several of the anthologies she has edited since the early 1980s. Her Modern Arabic Poetry (1987), in particular, stands out as a landmark in the history of Arabic poetry in English translation, for the following reasons. First, as a leading poet and authority on the subject, Jayyusi has carefully chosen a large number of poems representative of the various phases of modern Arabic poetry, ranging from the neoclassical to the more recent and radical transformation Arabic poetry has undergone. The anthology includes examples (sometimes excerpts or fragments) from the works of more than 90 poets arranged into two broadly defined sections: poets before and after the 1950s. Second, as a testament to the pan-Arab unity of culture and spirit, Jayyusi’s collection provides a broader geographical representation by including poets from different parts of the Arab world (from the Gulf to the Atlantic), although more poets are still drawn, for understandable considerations, from Egypt and the Fertile Crescent region (Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and Palestine). Third, the anthology has succeeded to a large measure in providing a truly poetic translation of the original text, thanks to the participation of a number of American, British, Canadian, and Irish poets: Alan Brownjohn, Patricia Alanah Byrne (Rosenfield), Diana Der Hovanessian, Charles Doria, Alistair Eliot, Thomas Ezzy, Samuel Hazo, John Heath-Stubbs, W. S. Merwin, Christopher Middleton, Naomi Shihab Nye, Desmond O’Grady, Peter Porter, Anthony Thwaite, and Richard Wilbur. This was achieved in cooperation with a group of first translators competent in both Arabic and English. There is an obvious literary benefit in enlisting the help of creative translators in the target language, not only because of their rootedness in the poetics of their literary tradition and their first-hand familiarity with the literary taste of their time but also because they are more qualified to serve as effective intermediaries between two different cultures: their own and that of the source language. Such an approach does have, as some critics maintain, its own potential risk in that it may lead to inaccurate rewriting of the original poems.

Inaccuracies in Jayyusi’s anthology are rare, however, although in some cases, especially with traditional poetry, the original poems have been deliberately truncated or abridged in English. For example, the translated version of “Lullaby for the Hungry,” by the greatest modern neoclassical poet, Muhammad Mahdi al-Jawahiri (1900–1997), is based on 20 lines selected from a much longer (100-line) poem. But, as Jayyusi herself stated, such neoclassical poetry presents the translator with a most onerous task in view of the fact that it is built on well-entrenched phrases and a rich legacy of rhetorical usages and other devices that are not translatable without the aid of unwieldy footnotes. Instead of excluding the translation of traditional poetry, which still plays a central role in the Arab world, Jayyusi has wisely attempted to represent it in her anthology in abridged versions.

Other general anthologies that deserve to be noted include al-Udhari’s Modern Poetry of the Arab World (1986), which presents, according to a chronological and theme-oriented scheme, works of leading poets from the Fertile Crescent region: Iraq, Jordan/Palestine, Lebanon, and Syria. The selections are grouped under four headings: the Taf’il movement (Iraqi School), 1947–1957; the Majallah Shi’r movement (Syrian School),
The anthologies cited above include the works of several women poets; but Kamal Boullata’s anthology (1978) is dedicated exclusively to Arab women’s contributions to the poetic revolution that has taken place during the last 50 years. Among the 13 poets represented are Nazik al-Mala’ikah (Iraq), Salma Khadra Jayyusi and Fadwa Tuqan (Palestine), and Fawziyya Abu Khalid (Saudi Arabia). Although not comprehensive in its coverage of women poets, Boullata’s work still serves as an important guide to Arab women’s creative spirit as they address personal, national, and universal problems of their time. It includes about 100 poems or extracts of poems, mostly translated from Arabic, but in some cases translated from French or originally written in English. The English translations from Arabic, primarily by Boullata, are notable for both artistic sensitivity and reliability. The fact that the translations have appeared in major world anthologies of women’s poetry may serve as a measure of this work’s success.

In contrast, however, to Boullata’s pioneering collection, Handal’s recent anthology (2001) stands out as an ambitious attempt to ensure a greater visibility not only for Arab women poets but also for other poets of Arab origin. International in its scope, the anthology presents the works of 83 poets, most of whom write in Arabic and are chosen from all Arab countries with the exception of Oman and the Sudan. The second-largest group is that of the Arab-American poets, followed by others who write in French or Swedish. By bringing together in one volume poets from different Arab and non-Arab regions, literary traditions, and religious backgrounds, Handal has sought, and succeeded to a large extent, to demonstrate some of the shared experiences and concerns (private, national and universal) that mark their poetry. The anthology begins with a detailed introduction (more than 60 pages),
which sheds light on salient stylistic and thematic aspects of Arab women’s poetry as it evolved during the 20th century. It concludes with biographical notes about the poets and the numerous translators (about 40), including American, Australian, and British poets, who contributed to the anthology. The greater visibility of Arab women poets is also reflected in the publication of an increasing number of their individual works (see, for example, titles listed below under Kashghari, al-Sabah, Saʿd, Saudi, and Tuqan).

As indicated earlier, and as this overview suggests, an extensive corpus of contemporary Arabic poetry has become accessible in English translation in a variety of sources, including numerous anthologies. It is important, however, to keep in mind that this corpus, extensive as it is, offers only a partial representation of Arabic poetry today. There are still many poets who have not been adequately represented or have been left out completely. Al-Babatin’s (1995) dictionary of living poets alone lists more than 1600 poets, selected from a much larger number of poets participating in a special survey. This is not to imply that all poets listed merit serious consideration for the purpose of translation. It only suggests that there is still a major gap in the fairly extensive corpus of translated poetry. This gap is particularly evident in relation to the contemporary poetry of North African countries: Algeria, Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia. It is also evident in the absence of individual collections representing other major modern poets, such as Amal Dunqul, and Ahmad Abd al-Muʿṭi Hijazi (Egypt), Salma Khadra Jayyusi and Tawfiq Sayigh (Palestine), Nazik al-Malaʿikah, Badr Shakir al-Sayyab, and Saʿdi Yusuf (Iraq) Abd al-Aziz al-Maqalih (Yemen), Yusuf al-Khal and others.

What is more noteworthy, perhaps, is the fact that although non–Arabic-speaking translators have become more involved in the translation of modern Arabic poetry, native Arabic speakers continue to serve as the primary anthologists. There are a few notable exceptions, such as the American poet Samuel Hazo, who translated Adonis; Denys Johnson-Davies, known for his translation of numerous Arabic works, including Mahmud Darwish’s poetry; O’Grady, and a few others, as the bibliography below indicates. It is also relevant to note that a fairly large number of the collections have been published in Arab countries, particularly Egypt, a fact that may limit their circulation or use in English-speaking countries.

**Further Reading**

Altoma, Salih J. *Modern Arabic Poetry in English Translation: A Bibliography.* Tangier: King Fahd School of Translation, Abdellmalek Essaadi U, 1993. [For more information on other anthologies not discussed above or listed below, see pp. 13–16, 146–49.]

**Pan-Arab Anthologies**


Obank, Margaret and Samuel Shimon, eds. *A Crack in the Wall: New Arab Poetry.* London: Saqi,
Selected Regional Anthologies


Poetic Experimentation in Egypt since the Seventies. *Alif* (Cairo: The American U in Cairo) 11 (1991). [A special issue that presents a bilingual anthology of poems selected from the works of about 20 contemporary Egyptian poets.]


Selected Anthologies of Poets


Guwaidah, Farooq, see Juwaydah, Faruq.
Hafidh, Yaseen Taha, see Hafiz, Yasin Taha.
Kabbani, Nizar, see Qabbani.
Naimy, Nadeem, see Hawi, Khalil.

THE DHAMMAPADA: A WORK IN MOTION

By Patrick Murphy

The Dhammapada has none of the stories, parables, and extended instruction that characterize the main Buddhist scriptures, the sutras. It is a collection of vivid, practical verses, gathered probably from direct disciples who wanted to preserve what they had heard from the Buddha himself. In the oral tradition of the sixth century before Christ, it must have been the equivalent of a handbook: a ready reference of the Buddha’s teachings condensed in haunting poetry and arranged by theme—anger, greed, fear, happiness, thought. Yet there is nothing piece-meal about this anthology. It is a single composition, harmonious and whole, which conveys the living presence of a teacher of genius.

—Eknath Easwaran

The preceding was written by Eknath Easwaran in his introduction to The Dhammapada. Dhammapada is a Pali term meaning “path to virtue,” “utterances of religion,” “the way of the Law,” or “the path of discipline.” All of these translations are accurate, yet no one is more accurate than another. The Dhammapada is a work in motion. Growing out of the discourses of Gautama Buddha, it made its way through the centuries as an oral tradition, and more recently as a work in translation. As illustrated by the many interpretations of the title, the Dhammapada is a text that encompasses broad ideas and multiple meanings. As we read it today, we are looking at the reconfiguration of groups of signs that have been scattered over the centuries. In this essay, I will be looking at the configuration of those signs as they have been translated over time and between cultures.

The Dhammapada is part of the Theravada canon of Buddhist literature, all of which are in Pali, a vernacular descendent of Sanskrit. This canon is divided into three pitakas, or “baskets.” The Dhammapada is part of the Sutta-Pitaka, or “Basket of Discourses,” which takes its form as discourses by the Buddha or his disciples (Pelikan, xvi). The other two baskets consist of the Abhidhamma-Pitaka, dealing with questions of metaphysics, and the Vinaya-Pitaka, containing the rules of the monastic order. Consisting of 423 verses divided into 26 chapters, the Dhammapada has been carried down through oral tradition, eventually being preserved in the Pali language.

In approaching this topic, I have been influenced by Octavio Paz and his conception of language and translation. There is a certain similarity between Paz’s conception of language and the Buddha’s conception of reality. The Buddha taught that everything we are and everything around us is composed of our thoughts; that there is no objective reality apart from our perception of it. Therefore, we exist in a state of constant change, a continuous series of changing thoughts, each one affecting the others. Paz conceives of language as a series of rotating signs that are valid only within a particular society and time period. There is no single objective reality apart from the interpretation we make through language. For the Buddha, reality takes form as a series of changing thoughts; for Paz it is the rotation of signs. These parallel ideas will serve as my point of entrance into this text.

There are many decisions to be made before the translator begins dealing with the words. He or she must decide whether or not to adhere to the original structure—to preserve the rhythms and patterns of the original. He must decide whether or not his text will be self-sufficient or dependent upon subsidiary explanations. He must also decide when and how far to deviate from the text in an effort to be understandable to a Western audience. Moreover, as each translator works with the Pali text, he is interpreting it according to his own perceptions and understanding. The resulting work, as Paz would say, is a new and unique text, similar to but not identical with the original.
The translations I will be looking at range from simple and poetic to complex and burdensome. Beginning with the first English translation in 1881 by F. Max Müller, I will compare verses from a series of translations, each with its own distinct style and perspective. My goal here will be to highlight the particular choices made by each translator and how those choices affect the reader’s interpretation. By examining the movement from Pali to English, we also examine the movement from Eastern thought to Western thought. It is in the translation process that we are forced to immerse ourselves in the multiplicity of meanings provided by the text. In this way, we come away with a broad understanding of the work. My purpose in this essay is to look at the translation process, to highlight the difficulties, to look at how individual translators make choices and how these choices affect our interpretation of the text. Since the depth and breadth of meaning in each verse prevents me from addressing more than a small selection, I have chosen verses that deal with central aspects of Buddhist thought.

A brief word about the texts: The translations of the Dhammapada that I will deal with in this essay come from a group of five texts that I have chosen on the basis of their scholarly significance and on the translators’ specific interpretive approaches. The oldest among the group is F. Max Müller’s translation in the collection entitled Sacred Books of the East. This is the first translation of the Dhammapada into English and was originally published in 1881. Of the five texts, Müller’s translation is the most concise, including only a brief introduction. S. Radhakrishnan’s 1950 translation of the Dhammapada was well received upon its initial publication and is still in wide circulation today. Of the five texts, Müller’s translation is the most concise, including only a brief introduction. S. Radhakrishnan’s 1950 translation of the Dhammapada was well received upon its initial publication and is still in wide circulation today. Radhakrishnan was president of India from 1962 to 1967, chancellor of Delhi University, and author of Indian Philosophy and An Idealist View of Life. His translation of the Dhammapada includes an exhaustive introduction, the Pali text, and explanatory notes. A more recent translation, Eknath Easwaran’s The Dhammapada: Translated for the Modern Reader, was published in 1985 by Nilgiri Press. Of the five translations I deal with here, Easwaran’s makes for the most pleasant reading experience. His translations demonstrate an intimate knowledge of the void between Eastern and Western thought that aids him in building bridges between the two. Also included in the collection is Oxford University Press’s Sacred Writings: The Dhammapada. Edited by Jaroslav Pelikan and translated by John Ross Carter and Mahinda Palihawadana, this translation is the result of a collaboration between Eastern and Western scholarship. It includes the Pali text, literal translations, and commentary for every verse. I have found the notes in this book to be invaluable in preparing this essay. Finally, the most unusual version of the Dhammapada in this collection is entitled Treasury of Truth: Illustrated Dhammapada. This book incorporates a full-page illustration of each verse, literal translations, prose translations, notes, Pali alphabet and phonemes, commentary, and the original story from which the verses are said to stem. Treasury of Truth was translated by the Venerable Weragoda Sarada Maha Thero.

Yamaka Vaggo

In his introduction to the first chapter of Eknath Easwaran’s Dhammapada, Stephen Rupenthal writes, “Every reader knows that one book which becomes part of one’s life means more than a thousand others. The Dhammapada was meant as such a book, and its method for transforming our lives is given right in the first chapter” (Easwaran, 75). Known as the Twin Verses or The Pairs, Chapter One of the Dhammapada presents the reader with pairs of possibilities, each leading to its own destiny. Organized into 10 pairs of 20 verses, this first chapter lays out a course of action and consequence. The pairs are a reflection of each other, each beginning with the same premise, from which follow contrasting paths of discipline and indulgence.

All that we are is the result of what we have thought: it is founded on our thoughts, it is made up of our thoughts. If a man speaks or acts with an evil thought, pain follows him, as the wheel follows the foot of the ox that draws the carriage.
All that we are is the result of what we have thought: it is founded on our thoughts, it is made up of our thoughts. If a man speaks or acts with a pure thought, happiness follows him, like a shadow that never leaves him.
(Müller, 115)

A man’s reality is determined by his thoughts. Buddhism teaches that there is no objective reality apart from our individual perception of it. Therefore, our lives take shape as a consequence of the content of our mind. Because this idea is central to Buddhist thought, I want to examine the first line of this first verse more closely.

Manopubbangama dhamma manosettha manomaya

1 Preceded by perception are mental states, for them is perception supreme, from perception have they sprung. (Pelikan, 89)

1 Mind preceded all knowables, mind’s their chief, mind-made are they. (Thero, 2)

1 All that we are is the result of what we have thought: it is founded on our thoughts, it is made up of our thoughts. (Müller, 115)

1 (The mental) natures are the result of what we have thought, are chieftained by our thoughts, are made up of our thoughts. (Radhakrishnan, 58)

Much of the variation in translation of this verse revolves around the word dhamma. Dhamma has many different connotations. In its most common form, it means “truth” or “religious law,” but in this first chapter, dhamma is used to describe experience, or more exactly, “the meaningful totality of experience” (Thero, 3). In Buddhist thought, it is this totality of experience that makes us who we are.

In these four versions, we see four different interpretations of the word dhamma: moving from “all that we are” to “mental states” to “knowables” to “mental natures.” This first verse demonstrates a certain mobility that has substantial consequences for interpretation. To translate dhamma as “all that we are,” as Müller has done, exhibits a profound reconstruction of Western ideas. Here, reality or “being” results from thought. This is quite different from the traditional Western point of view that our thoughts or mental states are a reaction to a preexisting reality. For Buddhists, reality does not exist apart from mind, the duality of mind-body is absent. Müller’s translation captures this idea very succinctly by contrasting being and thought.

Looking at Carter and Paliawadana’s version (edited by Pelikan), the relationship between “perception” and “mental states” is less clear. This essential aspect of Buddhist thought is confounded by a phrasing that, to the Western intellect, fails to uncover the essence of the verse. In juxtaposing “perception” and “mental states,” the reversal of the relationship between being and thinking is lost. The phrase “mental states,” while being a more literal translation of dhamma, lacks the meaningful connotation of Müller’s “all that we are.” Thero’s translation is similarly problematic. The phrase “mind precedes all knowables” betrays the causal relationship being presented. To a Westerner, this would seem to be self-evident—certainly, the existence of a mind would have to precede knowledge. Thero’s choice of words fails to uncover the relationship between thought and being. In translating dhamma, the translators must be aware of the fact that mind or mental states, while closely connected with being and reality in the East, are almost synonymous with thought and perception in the West. Therefore, the translator must choose a phrasing that clarifies the reversal of causation that Buddhist thought presents to the Western intellect.

The greatest departure from the literal translation, and also the most succinct and to the point, is found in Eknath Easwaran’s 1985 translation: “Our life is shaped by our mind; we become what we think” (Easwaran, 78). Here, the terms are clear; being results from thought. Like Müller, Easwaran configures the signs appropriately so that the Western mind can grasp the concept. Moreover, Easwaran simplifies the phrase while at the same
time highlighting the profundity: “we become what we think.” Although the use of the phrase “we become” is a substantial departure from manopub-bangama (thought precedes) or manosettha (thought is dominant), it demonstrates a successful effort to bridge the gap between Eastern and Western thought.

**Appamada-Vaggo**

*Appamada Vaggo*, like the Twin Verses, presents the disciple with two paths leading to opposite destinations. Those who are aware of the world around them, who maintain this awareness, and who are vigilant in their practice will break the cycle of birth and death known as *samsara*. Those who are slothful, lazy, or caught up in the pursuit of pleasure will continue to suffer multiple births and deaths.

According to the commentary in Pelikan’s *Dhammapada*, the Pali term *appamada* “illuminates a massive meaning, spans a massive content; for the entire Word of the Buddha included in the three *pitakas* taken up and given articulation, boils down to the word ‘awareness’ only” (Pelikan, 109). But not just awareness as we think of it in the West, but an intense and constant awareness of experience. It is said that a man endowed with this type of awareness will give his full and undivided attention to all experience whether he is washing dishes or making love. This intensity and constancy is essential in following the path laid out by the Buddha. For this reason, *appamada* is also translated as “vigilance” or “earnestness.” Since the translators are bound by the verse structure of the *Dhammapada*, they don’t have the freedom to explain this in prose form. Much as in poetry, the *Dhammapada* demonstrates a certain fixity of signs that correspond to multiple meanings. In light of this, how does one choose a term to signify *appamada* when no single English term encompasses the multiple meanings of the term? The translator must be adept at using context and combinations that provide the multiplicity of meaning denoted by appamada. It is not merely the sign in itself that points to meaning but also the configuration and convergence of multiple signs. In the translations that follow, it can be seen how these translators have dealt with (or failed to deal with) the dilemma of configuring signs so that they encompass this multiplicity of meaning.

**Appamado amatapadam pamado maccuno padam Appamatta na miyanti ye pamatta yatha mata.**

21 Earnestness is the path of immortality (Nirvana), thoughtlessness the path of death. Those who are in earnest do not die, those who are thoughtless are as if dead already. (Müller, 117)

21 Vigilance is the abode of eternal life, thoughtlessness is the abode of death. Those who are vigilant (who are given to reflection) do not die. The thoughtless are as if dead already. (Radhakrishnan, 66)

21 The path to the Deathless is awareness; Unawareness, the path of death. They who are aware do not die; They who are unaware are as dead. (Pelikan, 109)

21 Be vigilant and go beyond death. If you lack vigilance, you cannot escape death. Those who strive earnestly will go beyond death; those who do not can never come to life. (Easwaran, 81)

Müller has chosen “earnestness” as his translation of appamada, a term synonymous with sincerity and seriousness. In and of itself, it lacks the breadth of meaning signified by *appamada*. So the job of the translator is to open appamada, in this case “earnestness,” up to multiple meanings. This can be done through using particular combinations of words, i.e., pluralizing the meaning through the use of context. This particular verse provides that opportunity through its oppositional structure. Because two opposing paths are laid out, each path can be defined by its opposite: awareness/unawareness, mindfulness/lack of mindfulness. Therefore, in the careful choice of an opposite to appamada, the translator has the opportunity to broaden the reader’s interpretation of the term. Müller has chosen...
“thoughtlessness” as the opposition for “earnestness.” This term is troubling, for it has connotations that run contrary to the meanings being expressed in this verse. “Thoughtlessness,” if interpreted as lacking thought, is not necessarily a bad thing in Buddhist philosophy. Nibbana, the supreme enlightenment, is a state described as beyond thought, a state where the mind is still and fully awake, uninterrupted by the constant flux of thoughts. While Müller probably was thinking of thoughtlessness as “a lack of consideration,” nevertheless, the use of thoughtlessness may serve to confound rather than clarify the meanings being signified here.

Radhakrishnan demonstrates a similar uneasiness in contrasting vigilance and thoughtlessness as the paths to Nibbana and Samsara, respectively. Easwaran also uses vigilance, but stays away from the problems caused by “thoughtlessness.”

The translation in Pelikan’s Dhammapada demonstrates an entirely different perspective on the verse. Whereas the others have emphasized hard work and vigilance, Carter and Palihawadana have chosen to emphasize “awareness.” Certainly, both awareness and vigilance are encompassed in the meaning of appamada, but to prioritize one or the other reflects a difference in interpretation. This raises the broader question as to whether the inconsistencies I have highlighted heretofore are a result of translation processes or interpretive processes. When one is translating a text with the breadth of meaning found in the Dhammapada, translation becomes an act of interpretation. The opposite also holds true: interpretation becomes an act of translation, for one must translate not only the words but also the cultural context behind the words. In reading the Dhammapada, we are moving not only from one language to another but also from one civilization to another.

Radhakrishnan’s translation of this verse demonstrates a unique style. Illustrating the need to pluralize meaning through context, here as in other verses, he is given to including parenthetical comments. He qualifies vigilance with “(who are given to reflection).” Without a doubt, this style clarifies the meaning and gives the reader a more complete understanding of appamada. But it raises the question as to the point at which the translator strays too far from the verse structure of Dhammapada. Surely, one could include a wide variety of parenthetical comments in the text as a means of clarification, but at what detriment to the poetic nature of the work? This effort at clarification is approached differently in Thero’s Dhammapada, which includes a separate “explanatory” translation of each verse. This translation, unbound by the verse structure, uses the freedom of prose to fix the meaning. Following are the translation of verse 21 and the explanatory translation by Thero:

21 Heedfulness is the Deathless path,  
Heedlessness, the path to death  
Those who are heedful do not die,  
Heedless ones are like the dead. (Thero, 44)

The path to the deathless is the perpetual awareness of experience. The deathless does not imply a physical state where the body does not die. When an individual becomes totally aware of the process of experiencing, he is freed from the continuity of existence. Those who do not have that awareness are like the dead, even if they are physically alive.

So, if the prose version is more clear in terms of conveying meaning, why adhere to the verse structure at all? After all, shouldn’t the goal be comprehension? What is it about the structure that is so important as to give it priority over meaning? Might it be that the rhythm of the verse is as important in signifying meaning as the signs themselves? Since these verses were originally spoken, not read, there is an aspect of performance to the Dhammapada. It has lived most of its life as oratory. Therefore, the adherence to the verse structure is an effort to retain the performance, which in itself is imbued with meaning. It is important to remember that in an examination of the written text, the Dhammapada is removed from this central meaning-giving aspect. This work was not originally read by the Buddha’s disciples, but experienced by them. Just as the score of a musical piece can add to our understanding, it
cannot replace the auditory reception of the piece. Similarly, these explanatory translations, while helpful, cannot replace the performance. And it is this verse structure that holds onto the performance of the Dhammapada.

Citta Vaggo

In Citta Vaggo, the Buddha characterizes the nature of one’s mind as stubborn, willful, deep, fickle, and subtle. It is the battleground for the preeminent battle of humanity. “No conqueror, not even Napoleon or Alexander, ever fought a battle more significant than that waged for control over one’s mind” (Easwaran, 84). The mind has the capacity for both good and evil, the former being the result of ceaseless attention and training, the latter being the result of neglect. The Buddhist concept of mind is difficult to translate, for it encompasses much more than the largely intellectual Western conception of “that which reasons.” In Buddhist terms, the mind is much closer to soul, consciousness, encompassing emotional states and temperament. Mind is the essence of a person, tied closely to kamma (Karma), and remains as an entity after death. The term Cittam is commonly translated as either mind or thought. In his commentary on chapter 3, Thero writes, “writers on Buddhism mistakenly call it ‘mind’ or ‘consciousness.’ But what it means is the affective rather than the cognitive aspects of the mental process” (Thero, 71). The translations of verses 35 and 36 follow:

Dunnigghassa lahuno yattakamanipatino cittasa damatho sadhu cittam dantam sukhavaham.

Sududdasam sunipunam yathakamanipatinam cittam rakkhetha cittam guttan sukhavaham.

35 Hard it is to train the mind, which goes where it likes and does what it wants. But a trained mind brings health and happiness.

36 The wise can direct their thoughts, subtle and elusive, wherever they choose: a trained mind brings health and happiness. (Easwaran, 87)

35 Commendable is the taming
Of mind, which is hard to hold down,
Nimble, alighting wherever it wants,
Mind subdued brings ease.

36 The sagacious one may tend the mind,
Hard to be seen, extremely subtle,
Alighting wherever it wants.
The tended mind brings ease.
(Pelikan, 123)

35 The control of thought, which is difficult to restrain, fickle, which wanders at will, is good; a tamed mind is the bearer of happiness.

36 Let the wise man guard his thought, which is difficult to perceive, which is extremely subtle, which wanders at will. Thought which is well guarded is the bearer of happiness. (Radhakrishnan, 70)

35 It is good to tame the mind, which is difficult to restrain, fickle, which wanders at will; a tamed mind brings happiness.

36 Let the wise man guard his thoughts, for they are difficult to perceive, very artful, and they rush wherever they list: thoughts well guarded bring happiness. (Müller, 118)

Remembering back to the first chapter, in reading the Dhammapada we must shift our perception of the mind from an entity that makes sense of “what is” to an entity that determines “what is.” Thoughts are the individual products of thinking, whereas mind is that which performs the function of thinking. Thoughts are, in and of themselves, temporary. In Buddhist literature, they are often compared to waves in the ocean, arising and subsiding. The mind, on the other hand, suggests not only permanence but also immortality, not unlike that of the “soul.” Cittam encompasses both of these aspects and more.
In the translations of *Citta Vagga*, we see a dilemma similar to the one the term *appamada* presented in chapter 2. The English signs are overly specific, lacking the ability to signify the full range of meaning inherent in the Pali term. In these translations, it can be seen clearly how the translators use combinations and context in an effort to pluralize meaning.

Looking at Radhakrishnan’s translation, notice how he shifts from thought to mind in translating *cittam*. It is this oscillation that signifies the attempt to pluralize meaning. The juxtaposition of the permanent connotations of mind and the fleeting qualities of thought open up the meaning to signify the broadness of meaning encompassed by *cittam*. Easwaran and Müller also demonstrate this oscillation. However, Carter and Palihawadana maintain the translation of *cittam* as “mind” throughout the two verses. While I do not suggest that this confounds the meaning, I do believe that it fails to capitalize on the opportunity to encompass the broader connotations of these verses.

**Bala Vaggo**

Chapter 5 of the *Dhammapada* is translated as both “Fools” and “The Childish.” The verses in this chapter describe the world as inhabited by the fool. Foolishness here is a matter not of mental capacity but rather of awareness. For this reason, many translators prefer to translate *bala* as “childishness.” In his introduction, Easwaran writes, “A fool’s behavior is not likely to improve, but a child is simply immature; given time and experience, he will grow up. The Buddha was a compassionate teacher whose path was open to people of all capacities; he would not deprecate anyone’s ability to grow” (Easwaran, 91). In looking at the translations, the translator’s unique perspective presents itself in the manner in which he or she treats the term *bala*.

*Digha jagarato rattī digham santassa yojanam*

*Digho balanam samsaro saddhammah avijanatam*

60 Long is the night to him who is awake; life to the foolish who do not know the true law. (Müller, 120)

60 Long is the night to those who are awake; long is the road to those who are weary; Long is the cycle of birth and death to those who know not the dharma. (Easwaran, 94)

60 Long is the night to him who is awake, long is the yojana to him who is weary; long is the chain of existence to the foolish who do not know the true law. (Radhakrishnan, 79)

60 Long is the night for one awake, Long is a league to one exhausted, Long is samsara to the childish ones Who know not dhamma true. (Pelikan, 146)

Both Müller and Radhakrishnan use the traditional “foolish,” whereas Carter and Palihawadana have used “childish.” The term “foolish,” as Easwaran points out, lacks the emphasis on growing and learning that “childish” has. The choice of using “childish” incorporates both a sense of impermanence and the capacity to grow. Using this term has the added value of shifting the verse to illustrate not only the folly of one who is not aware but also the propensity for growth that the Buddha made central in his teaching. In the chapter title, Easwaran translates *bala* as “immature,” which, like “childish,” encompasses a propensity for growth. But looking at the text, Easwaran has chosen to use neither, opting to leave the direct translation of *bala* out completely. He allows the phrase “those who know not the dharma” to stand alone. Once again, Easwaran departs from the text to a greater extent than the other translators, while maintaining both lyrical rhythm and clarity.

Also of interest in this verse is the translation of the word *samsara*. This concept is uniquely Buddhist, referring to the chain of birth, aging, death, and rebirth. From a Buddhist point of view, this continual rebirth is seen not as a continuation of
life but rather as the continuation of death. Being born again is not something Buddhists aspire to, for it is a continuance of the suffering inherent in life. The Buddhist goal, Nibbana, is to end this chain of birth and death, giving up the attachment to physical manifestations of the spirit.

In Müller’s translation, “long is life to the foolish,” the concept of samsara is lost. The Westerner unfamiliar with Eastern religion would surely interpret “long is life” as a good thing. Easwaran and Radhakrishnan both translate samsara with this in mind. What is interesting is that Carter and Paliyawadana (and Thero as well) choose not to translate the term samsara at all, maintaining the Pali term in the text. This brings up a fascinating question: When to translate terms that have complex connotations, and when to leave them as they are. The answer to this question is a function of the supporting material in the book. Both Thero’s and Pelikan’s books include explanatory notes in which an explanation of samsara is given. The use of the nontranslated term in the text provides a sort of tabula rasa on which both the reader and translator are free from English terms whose connotations may confound rather than clarify meaning. This is one advantage to including extensive notes and explanations. Conversely, using the nontranslated terms and relying on supplementary material leaves the text somehow incomplete and insufficient as an entity in and of itself. This dichotomy accounts for the larger deviations between the translations I have dealt with. Thero’s and Pelikan’s versions include the most supporting material, and looking back through the translations presented in this essay, it is these two versions that are most literal and demonstrate a closer adherence to the rhythm of the Pali text. Müller’s and Easwaran’s translations include far less supporting material, and therefore, they take greater liberties with their translations. I would suggest that this greater liberty accounts for the self-sufficiency and overall clarity of meaning found in these texts. Radhakrishnan’s translation is something of an enigma among the five, for it seems that he has straddled the line between the two approaches. For this reason, it demonstrates neither the purity and literalness of Thero’s and Pelikan’s nor the clarity and self-sufficiency of Müller’s and Easwaran’s.

In examining these five translations, I have found that it is at the point in which the texts diverge from one another that one can truly immerse oneself into the meaning of the Dhammapada. It breathes through plurality, and it is this plurality that has kept readers coming back to it over the centuries. The delight one feels upon encountering a new way of understanding an old text is no less intense than the event of one’s initial encounter with that text. In this way, the work escapes obsolescence and remains relevant between civilizations and through time.

Works Cited

THE POWER OF TRANSLATION: THE EFFECTS OF A FLUENCY DISCOURSE

By Özlem Sensoy

Translation wields enormous power in constructing representations of foreign cultures.
Lawrence Venuti, *The Scandals of Translation*

Introduction

Venuti’s cautionary words hold true for the case of Turkish literature, not merely because it is a foreign culture that is represented as a limited canon in English translation but also because the works chosen and translated are done so by a mere handful of academic scholars, writers, and poets. I will review the translations of one of the most widely read scholars and translators of Turkish literature, Talat Sait Halman, to explore the types of power wielded in the construction of the Turkish culture via the translation of its literature. Viewed to be, consciously or not, dominated by the discourse of fluency, a popular translation of a period poem will be evaluated to see to what extent the determining features of the text have been preserved or separated in the translation. I suggest that the preservation of these determining features is a critical aspect of the translation process that should not be avoided, because it identifies a text as Turkish, as belonging to a particular literary movement, as the work of a particular author, and thus as worthy of translation and study to begin with. It is indisputable that Halman’s translations of Turkish literature have played a substantive part in bringing Turkish literature to an English-speaking audience that would otherwise not have had access to it. Yet, at the same time, it is possible that the discourse of fluency has likewise contributed to the perpetuation of a generic, unisymbolic, unicicultural perception of what constitutes the West’s understanding of Turkish literature and the various literary movements within it. In the interest of time and space, and recognizing the limits to which such claims may hold true, I will try to avoid attempts at making, proving, or disproving universal proclamations on translation. Rather, via a study of one Halman translation of poet Cemal Süreya’s poem “Gül” [(The) Rose], I hope that particular observations specific to this poet and this translation may support more critical evaluations of translations of other poems and the products of other translators of less well-known literatures.

What is the Discourse of Fluency?

For students and scholars of Turkish literature, or any literary culture that is represented significantly as a body of translations, the issue of translation methodology is unavoidable. Whether in discussing the merits of one version over another, or pulling together one’s own literal (or more literary) translation, questions as to accuracy and faithfulness (in both language and content) unavoidably arise. The translator’s many challenges go beyond what seems to be the unbreachable canyon between the linguistic system of modern Turkish and that of, for instance, modern English. We need also to consider the challenges posed by different periods and literary movements within a particular system: for instance, how does the translator differentiate the language of a 16th- from that of an 18th-century qaside? Or the narrative voice of Nazlı Eray from that of Firuzan? None of these are new challenges for anyone who is involved with literature or language studies, and I do not claim to have the answers to all, or any, of these concerns. What I hope to do, however, is to illustrate the very absence of such differences in the canon of Turkish literature in English translation and to suggest that this absence may be a result of the fluency discourse that has dominated Western academic (and economic) discussions on the merits of a particular translation. This discourse has been a contributor to the formation of a homogeneous melting pot of...
global literature in an English-language environment that values what Lawrence Venuti calls the invisibility of the translator:

“Invisibility” is the term I will use to describe the translator’s situation and activity in contemporary Anglo-American culture. It refers to two mutually determining phenomena: one is an illusionistic effect of discourse, of the translator’s own manipulation of English; the other is the practice of reading and evaluating translations that has long prevailed in the United Kingdom and the United States….A translated text…is judged acceptable…when it reads fluently, when the absence of any linguistic or stylistic peculiarities makes it seem transparent…The illusion of transparency is an effect of fluent discourse, of the translator’s effort to ensure easy readability by adhering to current usage, maintaining continuous syntax, fixing a precise meaning.¹

The dominance of the discourse of fluency is especially problematic for a literary culture such as Turkish that is represented in a limited way in English, in terms of both what is translated and by whom. The need to make what is foreign comprehensible is in itself a crucial goal; however, when the goal dominates the translatorial decisions made upon the text itself, the resulting translation exhibits more the attempts at normalizing the text (making it comprehensible) rather than illustrating what the text itself is or may be. As each text of Turkish literature from various periods and by various writers is translated, the resulting normalization of the texts (in attempts at making them accessible to English speakers) creates a homogeneous landscape of Turkish literary styles in the English canon, thus making it difficult to discern in the English the varied styles, specific turns of phrase, canonized vocabulary, etc., that identify particular literary movements.

One such literary movement is the İkinci Yeni (Second New) movement, which opens up in the mid-1950s. Cemal Süreya is considered to be among its leading figures. Like other literary movements, the Second New modernist movement is identifiable by certain stylistic properties that not only define it within the landscape of modern Turkish literature in general but also define what it is not, thereby making these stylistic properties core features of its poetic discourse. For this reason, it seems valid to expect that any translation of a poem belonging to this particular movement will preserve these very stylistic features in order to situate, within the English canon of Turkish literature, what the properties of this poetic mode are and are not. But first, who were the Second New authors and what are these defining stylistic features that are to be preserved?

The Second New

A cogent explanation of what the Second New movement was is given by Asım Bezirci in this way:²

The Second New is a poetic movement that blooms after 1954. Its leading figures are poets including Oktay Rifat, İlhan Berk, Turgut Uyar, Edip Cansever, Cemal Süreya, Sezai Karakoç, Ece Ayhan, Ülkü Tamer, Tevfik Akdağ and Yılmaz Gruda. The name “Second New” was coined by the critic Muzaffer Erdost. In reality, this is a deceptive naming. The reason being that when considering the “newnesses” that our poetry has been undergoing since the Tanzimat, it would only be appropriate to call the Second New the “Eighth New.” But since the Second New in a sense grows as a reaction to the Garip movement (The First New), and because it was repeated so frequently, this name has held.³

According to Bezirci, this movement is identifiable in the context of its position and relationships with each of the other newnesses or modernities. Thus, just as the Second New text is fixed within the canon of Turkish literature in Turkish by its referential positions vis-à-vis other movements in the literary landscape, likewise any translation of a
Second New work would need to situate itself in opposition to other works within the canon of Turkish literature in English. Given the obvious fact that not one translator at any one time is working on translating the whole corpus of what is Turkish literature, this strategy is seemingly difficult. When the particular features that situate the Second New in relation to other movements in Turkish are considered, however, transporting a similar system into English seems more conceivable.

Second New poetics can be identified by the following features set out by Bezirci. First, it is a movement that breaks from the forms and structures of traditional poetry. The movement “strives for an immeasurable, pure Turkish.” It approaches formalism in its structures, giving priority to form over content. Poet Ilhan Berk writes:

Actually, poetry doesn’t say anything. The poetry of our time is no longer written for the purposes of saying something. The topic of poetry is nothingness, it grows from nothingness. The Second New is on the side of poetry which isn’t made to be understood. Anyone who wants to understand something may read prose. Poetry must be the absence of topic and narration.

The poetry of the Second New strives for the deformation of the spoken language and of the standardized images in literature. Another defining feature of the Second New is synaesthesia, to cross the wires of the aspects of sense, to appropriate them by image or form. Next is free association, not only to challenge and stretch traditional associations of image and form but also to break them. The Second New poetry’s next feature is abstraction, the move away from the many in favor of the one, from the whole to the part. Another aspect of the Second New is the absence of sense, an attempt to remove any rhetoric, commentary, or narrative from poetry. Next is imaging, that is, bringing image to the fore over content. “It is necessary that a poem which distances itself from meaning must secure the ‘anticipated joy and especially the effect and impression’ by way of image.” And finally, the Second New poetry strives to lean away from reason, to reach outside the boundaries of logic. Although many of these defining principles may be collapsed into broader concepts than what Bezirci has outlined, this detailed mapping is valuable to the translator of Second New literature in that it succinctly provides the black outline drawing within which the translator may color in the poem. It may be appropriate now to move on to a case study of a Second New poem, to evaluate to what extent these defining features are preserved in translation.

Case Study: The Rose

Cemal Süreya’s poem “The Rose” is one of the best-known Turkish poems in English translation, but it is not known specifically for being a Second New poem (although the poet is recognized as being a leading figure in the movement). There are, I believe, two reasons why this poem is one of the most widely available Turkish poems in English translation. The first is the fame of the translator. Talat Sait Halman has published over 2500 Turkish poems in English translation and is both a poet and an academic scholar of Turkish literature. Thus, his authority as a translator who is both familiar with the source literary culture and is a poet in his own right gives him the status of producing what many consider to be authoritative translations. The second reason is the distribution of Halman’s translations. Given the limited number of translators working in the field of Turkish literature and the absence of other “voices” translating “The Rose,” for instance, Halman’s translation gains canonic status. Although Halman himself has written in various sources that no one translator can produce the authoritative translation of any work, this nevertheless does not negate the fact that in the field of Turkish scholarship today, his work is considered to be the source to consult when seeking a translation of any Turkish literary text. It is important to keep this in mind, because it leads to some important questions. For instance, what happens to a literary culture represented in translation when many of its works are represented by one translator? And how well is our
understanding of Turkish literature shaped in light of this limited representation? Likewise, it seems important that those of us working in the field not merely evaluate more critically the production by the one translator but also provide guidelines for evaluation—i.e., what is it specifically that we are looking for in this translation? In the case of “The Rose,” since it is a work of the Second New literary movement and it does reflect many of the features outlined above, it would seem that adherence to the features of the movement would provide fair grounds for criticism.

First, here is the Turkish poem, accompanied by a dictionary-style breakdown of vocabulary:

**Gül**

Gülün tam ortasında ağlıyorum

At the exact center of the rose, I am crying

Her aksam sokak ortasında öldükle

Every night at the center of the street, as I (it) die(s)

Önümü arka bilmiyorum

I don’t know my front, my back

Aزالğımı duyup duyp karanlıkta

I don’t know its (your eyes’) lessening (moving away, reduction) hearing it in the darkness

Ben ayakta tutan gözlərinim

Your eyes’ which hold me standing

Ellerini alyor sabaha kadar

Your hands [or: the hands of your eyes] until morning

Ellerin beyaz tekrar beyaz tekrar beyaz

Your hands are white again white again white

Keeping in mind the features of the Second New poetry as outlined above (namely, the absence of sense-making and narrative, which is replaced by
imagistic threads to render meaning, the use of synaesthesia to further apply image value and abstract sense experiences, and the challenging of the boundaries of language and logic associations), we can see how each of these is carried through the Turkish poem above. Süreya avoids committing the reader to a rigid Turkish syntax by providing possibilities. For instance, he maintains traditional Turkish word order, which dictates that the main verb fall at the end of the line. However, he challenges the boundaries of this syntax by creating ambiguities as to the objects of the verbs. For instance, in the first stanza, although it is clear that the subject “crying” is the speaker, I (for in Turkish the verb carries the subject marker), it is not clear what the circumstances are. The subject may be crying in the middle of the street as s/he dies, or as the rose itself dies. Taking advantage of the agglutinative structure of Turkish, he likewise manipulates the accusative object marker (-[n]I) to again allow for various object probabilities. For instance, in line 4, the accusative marker on “Azaldığı-nı” (its lessening) may be (1) the object of “bilmiyorum” (I don’t know), or (2) the possessed object of “gözlerinin” (your eyes’). It is also a possible rendering that the accusative marker be read “Azaldığın-ı” (your lessening). This kind of image-layering allows for various co-understandings that, guided by linguistic manipulation, stretch the boundaries of expected linguistic possibilities to render additional ones.

Recognizing the fact that such linguistic turns particular to Turkish may not be wholly imported into English, we may note some of the choices made by Halman. For example, he places his poet in the first word of the poem, “Seated,” which immediately removes the ambiguities and the meaningless feature of the source text. Likewise, Halman, rather than preserving the following ambiguity of who is actually “dying” in the poem, has chosen the “I” in line 2. These sorts of decisions render a single interpretation of two critical parts, thereby stripping the poem of not merely possible features, but defining features, features that situate this poem in the landscape of Turkish literature and the landscape of Turkish literature in English translation.

In addition to the linguistic twists and turns, Süreya maintains several synaesthesias throughout the poem. There is a geography of place that is established from the very beginning. There is a geographical center, first the rose, then the street, the individual (who cannot identify the front and back and thus is in between), and the rising and falling implied by “azaldığı” (your/its lessening/reducing) and “ayakta tutan” (holding me/upright). We can see that Halman has deleted nearly all of these geographies. The narrator is seated at the “core” of the rose but he dies “in” the street, and rather than an implied loss within his body as he is unable to identify his front or back, Halman renders “Önümü arkamı” (my front my back) as “Ahead and beyond” and ignores the placing of vertical space in lines 4 and 5 (“azaldığı” / “ayakta tutan”) altogether with a simple “eyes upheld.” Again, each of these decisions displaces the poem from its defining features.

In addition to the geography of space in the poem, there is the geography of an evolution in time as the persona begins walking the street in the nighttime and holds the lover’s hands until dawn. There is also a physical bodily geography, the “front and back” of the individual, the hands of the beloved, the broken arm and wing of the persona. Each of these geographies is sustained and developed throughout the poem, collecting from a unit center (i.e., the center of the rose) until they are released in a sharp burst from the end of a bugle in the final line of the poem. Synaesthesia is also revealed in Süreya’s poetic imaging in the red and white colors that dominate the poem. Halman’s choices in each regard seem to favor a fluent, meaning-rendered decision that creates a fluid poem that may be very poetic, but that now contains few of its source features. He opts for pretty rhymes and off-rhymes such as “weep-street,” “white-fright,” “horn-reborn,” which merely distract the reader from more formal structural rhymes. For instance, in line 7, “Ellerin tekrar beyaz tekrar beyaz” may be read as “Your hands are again white again white,” and also, “tekrar” may be read as the command form (“tekrarla”) of the verb “tekrarlamak” (to repeat). This makes a nice multisensory experience for the reader, who is asked to repeat the words that are now both a command to the reader and an observation by the
poet, in a very inclusionary experience. This characteristic of Second New literature can be seen to be part of its wish to produce a formal, language-driven, imagistic poetry without narrative and traditional structure. Each of these features particular to this poem represents an aspect of the Second New movement that situates this poem within the greater landscape of Turkish literature and that, when not preserved in translation, removes the aspects that define it as a poem belonging to this tradition and as a work of this prolific poet.

Conclusion

Recalling Lawrence Venuti’s cautionary words above, “Translation wields enormous power in constructing representations of foreign cultures,” this study has attempted to show to what extent such power is wielded in the case of Turkish literature. When we are faced with a literary tradition that is represented in a limited canon in English translation and when the work of translation itself is done by a handful of translators, our evaluation and commentaries on such translations become critical. In the absence of other translator “voices” producing multiple translations of the same work, and in the presence of a dominant translator, it is very easy to imagine a scenario in which the texts chosen and translated by that one translator gain canonic status, whether intended or not, in effect forming the primary, if not the sole, reference of what the Turkish literary landscape is. Rather than its seeming an apocalyptic premonition, I hope that this study has revealed the necessity for those of us who use translations in our studies and classes to consider these facts when bringing a less widely disseminated literature to an English-speaking audience.

The Rose

At the center of the rose
Weeping nightly
At the center of the street
Dying
No longer recognizing my front or my back
Listening lessening

In the darkness
Your eyes holding me
On foot
Your hands I take in mine
Loving until sun
Rise
So white your hands again white and white
I fear your hands so white
At the station a train
A while
Sometimes I
Am a man who cannot find the station

I take the rose in my hand
Spread across my face
However
Fallen to the street
Breaking my arm and wing
There is blood there is chaos there is a call
And at the edge of the bugle a gypsy a new

Notes

2 Translations, unless otherwise noted, are my own.
5 Ibid. p. 13. “ölcüsüz bir öztürkçecilige yönelirler.”
Modern Poetry in Translation is well known for its anthology issues (Brazilian, Dutch and Flemish, Filipino, French, German, Greek, Icelandic, Peruvian, Polish, Russian, Slovene, Turkish, Welsh etc.), drawing attention often to lesser known literatures. ‘Mother Tongues’ (MPT 17), for instance, surveys the non-English-language poetry of contemporary England (from Somali, Hungarian, Bengali, Arabic and many other languages). No less groundbreaking is an issue devoted to Palestinian and Israeli poetry, from Arabic and Hebrew, again a first attempt to represent the contrasting but related literatures produced in the same geographical territory.

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PLEASE MAKE CHEQUES PAYABLE TO
King’s College London (MPT)
Sony Labou Tansi, one of Africa’s foremost writers, is known for his plays as well as his novels. He is a writer for whom writing is a commitment. A careful analysis of his works shows how the author creates new words and transposes African words, songs, and expressions into the body of the narratives in French with or without their translations. He carries this style a step further in *Les yeux du volcan*, his fifth novel. According to Singou Basseha (1988), Labou Tansi was concerned about the speed at which events were changing in Brazzaville, his hometown. Within 15 years, the names of some streets had been changed seven times, thus losing a part of their history and identity. Because history is essential in nation building and in any planning for the future, it seemed obvious that Brazzaville, lacking a viable history, was heading for disaster. The city of Brazzaville therefore becomes symbolic and symptomatic of an Africa where everything is in turmoil. In this respect, *Les yeux du volcan* becomes the chronicle of a people whose future is uncertain precisely because they do not have a sense of history.

The narrative structure of the novel, like that of *L’anté-peuple* before it, follows a linear pattern, and events are presented chronologically. It is the story of a giant riding a horse-driven carriage who arrives in an African town (Brazzaville) and sets up a tent in the compound of a high school. Having declared that “si je dois mourir, eh bien! que cela soit ici” (if I have to die, well then, it should be at this place), he shakes hands with the crowd that has gathered to see him and receives the visit of the most important personalities in the city, some of whom are interested in the crimes that he is supposed to be selling. He offers tea and cigars to his visitors while evading their questions about his identity and the crimes he has for sale.

The title of the novel is a cry from within that explodes like events in *La vie et demie*. The volcano in the title is a metaphoric representation of Africa and other oppressed people elsewhere. The giant in *Les yeux du volcan* is killed because he failed to accomplish the mission entrusted to him. The symbolism of his death revolves around the notion of time. The eyes of the volcano, like those of the people, are watching, ready to strike back at those in power who are inefficient and slow to action. The people’s eruption that would bring about a revolution would nevertheless be marked by generosity and respect for humanity. Today, when mankind is torn between war (total death) and life, Benoît Goldmann, the hero, is the prophet of the future who has respect for human values.

What makes the novel most compelling, however, is the language of the author. Without resorting to the same translation strategies that Ahmadou Kourouma, for instance, employs in *Les soleils des indépendances* or *Monné, outrages et défis*, Labou Tansi nevertheless uses every occasion to emphasize the different languages present in his novel. It is significant to note that the very first words pronounced by the giant, the protagonist of the novel, are in the local African language: “Mogrodo bora mayitou...” (15). This expression, which is later translated as “Si je dois mourir...,” (16) (if I have to die), serves to remind the reader of the presence of an African language occupying the French space of the novel. In this way, both languages are made to assume equal importance, because the African expression becomes comprehensible to the monolingual reader only after its French translation. Thus, to understand the full import of the story, the reader is called upon to draw on the resources of the two languages.

Another strategy that Labou Tansi uses and that is reminiscent of African traditional oral performance is the introduction of African songs into the body of the narrative. To give primacy to the African word and to demonstrate its capacity to sustain discourse, the author has transported these songs from...
the African language into the French text without any accompanying translation:

Mahungu ko
Konkoto ko
Mu bakeno
Konko toko
Ku dia tu mundia
Konkoto ko
Ku lumbu ke
Konkoto ke
Mu gabeno (54).

If this song is introduced without its translation into French, it is because, as the narrator explains, it is a song known to all; it is “le chant contagieux des dieux kongo, connu de nous tous” (54) (the song we all know, the contagious song of the gods of Kikongo). Ironically, however, the fact that the song is only in Kikongo indicates that the all-inclusive “nous” (we) refers only to the people of the Kongo who share the same cultural heritage. In fact, it excludes the monolingual French reader who can understand the song only after it has been translated. Thus, in this particular instance, the narrator’s statement contrasts with an earlier one made about a song “connu de tous les habitants” (29) (known to all the people) of the city but that is made accessible to all readers through its French translation:

Viens voir
Le soleil est tombé fou
Viens boire
Le ciel qui pisse le jour
Le plus bas du monde
Mange le temps qui passe
Et mets tes jambes dans tes yeux (29).

While certain songs are inserted into the text without any translation (“Kamba ta Biyela ba muhondele e-e / Kani mwatu e-e / Ko kwa kena e-e” [56]), the translations of others are found in footnotes (“Wa luwidi.... kokwa kena” [127], “Bo Badindamana... Nsakala” [166]), while the meanings of others are explained in the body of the narrative:

Wa mana bindamana
Beto bala mambu we yola.
Ce refrain dénonçait l’intention de génocide que les Autorités nourrissaient à l’égard de Hozanna et de Nsanga-Norda... (159).

Rather than a simple reminder that we are in the presence of an African text, these Lingala/Kikongo words, accents, and rhythms are essential to the structure of the work, to its philosophical, sociological, and literary ambitions. By introducing these words and songs, these African turns of phrase, Labou Tansi deconstructs the form of the French novelistic genre to produce an authentic African text. If Les yeux du volcan is the dream of an African future, it is a dream viewed from a Lingala/Kikongo point of view.

The novel is also rich in allusions as it makes references to certain events that have a significant impact on African history and studies. On page 70, for instance, the discovery of “pétrole quatorze” (petroleum fourteen) by a doctor calls to mind the work of the Senegalese historian and anthropologist Cheik Anta Diop, who was famous for his work with “carbon 12,” while the name of Tombalbaye (one of the cities in which the story is set) and a reference to “des Tirailleurs tchadiens” (13) recall the events of the Chadian civil war. (It must be noted that Tombalbaye was the name of the Chadian president whose overthrow led to that country’s civil war.) Elsewhere, the narrator comments on the taking of the Bastille and refers to this French Revolution as “un bordel d’une Révolution” (73) (a worthless Revolution), thus removing the sacred aura surrounding the revolution on whose ideals France’s “civilizing” mission may be said to have been based. Foreign missionary activities in Africa also come up for scrutiny. Although Labou Tansi does not devote entire pages to a critique of the actions of missionaries in Africa in the manner of Mongo Beti (Le pauvre Christ de Bomba) [The Poor Christ of Bomba] or Ferdinand Oyono (Une vie de boy) [Houseboy], (Le vieux nègre et la médaille) [The Old Man and the Medal], he nevertheless stresses the dubious character of some of the European and American missionaries who were in
Africa to win more than souls. Thus, in the novel, the paternity of a mulatto child with blue eyes is attributed to Father Luxor Sadoun who, “basé à Indiana, ne passait jamais trois dimanches de suite sans se voir obligé de venir lâcher la volonté du Seigneur sur les pécheresses invétérées de Hondo-Norté et de Hozanna” (based in Indiana, never spent three consecutive Sundays without feeling obligated to release the will of the Savior on the inveterate female sinners of Hondo-Norté and Hozanna).

*Les yeux du volcan* is also rich in intertextual references. For example, the expression “maman de ma mere” (my mother’s mama) calls to mind Labou Tansi’s other novel, *L’etat honteux*, in which this expression figures prominently as one of the favorite expressions of the president. In addition, the events of *Les yeux du volcan* take place in the cities of Hondo-Norté, Westina, Hozanna, and Nsanga Norda, the same cities in which the events of *Les sept solitudes de Lorsa Lopez* are set. Similarly, “le temps des Oncles français” (the time of the French uncles) recalls Henri Lopes’ *Le pleurer-rire*, in which the French are also referred to as “les Oncles.” *Les yeux du volcan* therefore continues the author’s project of conjoining political denunciation and style.

The problematic of translation:

It is generally accepted that the most fundamental problem of all translation lies in the psychological differences between source and target languages, because each language possesses its own properties and carries its own peculiar meaning. This problem becomes even more pronounced in African writing, in which the European language is already tainted with a certain local quality. A talented writer like Labou Tansi manages to twist the French language to suit his own purposes and, in the process, demonstrates his mastery in creating new words and shifting the meaning of existing ones. Although we refer to Labou Tansi’s style as being highly personal, however, it is also true that we can describe his language of writing as a blend of African languages and the special kind of French spoken in the streets of Brazzaville.

Hence, the major problem that arises from the translation of his work resides in rendering and maintaining the form and meaning of his idiosyncratic manipulation of French into the English language. Let us take an example extracted from his description of the flow of a river and the vegetation that surrounds it:

Puis il avait regardé le fleuve, lancé comme une furia d’eau et de rochers sur des kilomètres, dans une espèce de danse blanchâtre. L’autre rive montrait les rochers du Diable et leurs dents, gestionnaires d’une végétation de misère. Au loin, flottaient les lambeaux d’un horizon affligé, qui tentait de régler sa mésentente avec les crêtes de Hondo-Norte. Valzara, derrière l’île d’Abanonso, semblait se gratter la tête entre deux nuages, comme pour protester contre les agissements des collines attribuées aux Libanais. (8-9)

The most difficult expression to translate in the above extract is “danse blanchâtre.” Because this expression is used to describe the kind of whitish substance that forms on the surface of the river when it flows over the rocks, a literal rendition of the expression as “a whitish dance” or “an off-white dance” would be meaningless in English. The other alternative would be to derive the meaning of the adjective “blanchâtre” from “blanc,” meaning “white,” “pure,” or “innocent.” A critical reading of the passage, however, will demonstrate that although the narrator attributes human actions to the non-human objects in the passage (for example, “régler sa mésentente” and “gratter la tête”), he describes the flow of the river, the surrounding vegetation, and the skyline in very negative terms. The word “furia” illustrates the intense, disordered, and destructive rage of the river, whereas the epithet given to the rocks, “Diable,” continues the image of disorder and destruction. In addition, while describing the vegetation as poor and the horizon as being “afflicted,” the author’s choice of the words “mésentente,” “gratter,” and “protester” further serves to expand on the image of desolation painted in the passage. Hence, the appropriate translation of “danse blanchâtre”...
would therefore be a translation that retains the negative image portrayed by the author. Because the flow of the river has been described as disordered and disorganized, the dance must perforce be characterized as being without harmony or rhythm. Thus, my translation of the above passage goes like this:

Then he had looked at the river, flowing like a furia of water and rocks along several kilometers in a kind of disharmonious dance. On the other bank could be seen Devil’s rocks and their jagged edges, rulers of a vegetation of misery. In the distance hung a glimpse of an afflicted horizon that was trying to come to terms with the crests of Hondo-Norte. Valzara, lying behind the island of Abanonso, seemed to scratch its head between the clouds as if to make a protest against the intrigues of the hills that were attributed to the Lebanese.

Similarly, a word like “ramardage,” in the expression “Quel ramardage magnifique!” (137) has to be understood not in terms of its actual meaning in French but in terms of how it is used by the author. “Ramardage” in French refers to the action of repairing fishing nets after the fishing season. In the novel, it is applied to the coming together of the giant and Benoît Goldmann, two apparently different people, for a common cause. Thus, the expression has to be understood as a form of an unusual arrangement. I therefore chose to translate the above expression as “What a magnificent arrangement!”

The other major problem concerns the translation of the names of streets and places. To retain the Francophone “flavor” of the original text, the initial strategy was to leave those names untranslated in the English version. Names of places such as “l’ancien marché aux Chiens,” “la colline des Soixante-Mètres,” and street names like “la rue des Poissons-Chats” or “la rue du Corbeau,” however, will create an unnecessarily exotic effect in an English text. As we have already pointed out, the writing of Les yeux du volcan was the author’s reaction to the ridiculousness of the speed at which names of streets and places were changing in his hometown of Brazzaville. Thus, the author’s choice of names serves to achieve the effect of emphasizing the absurdity in the names themselves and the preposterous nature of their change, an absurdity that leads to the production of a comic effect in the French text. To achieve the same effect as the one in the French version, the best possible alternative was to translate the names into English. Two examples will illustrate this point:

L’homme emprunta la rue de la Paix au niveau de l’ancien marché aux Chiens, dans l’ancien quartier des Hollandais, s’arrêta un moment pour river ses beaux yeux aux tuiles vertes de la cathédrale Anouar, traversa le quartier Haoussa, arriva au rond-point des Musiciens... L’homme monta la colline des Soixante-Mètres, traversa le chemin de fer, dépassa le bois d’Orzengi. (11)

The man took Peace street when he arrived at Dog market in the old Dutch quarter, stopped for a moment to rivet his beautiful eyes on the green tiles of Anouar cathedral, crossed the Hausa quarter, and arrived at Musicians roundabout... The man went up Sixty-Meters hill, crossed the railway track and went past the Orzengi forest.

The second example is even more illustrative of the absurd nature of the names of the streets and avenues that, in this case, are made up of plant names (Bougainvillées, Frangipaniers), a bird (Corbeau), and a book of alphabets (Abécédaire):

Il traversa la rue des Bougainvillées et l’allée des Frangipaniers, arriva devant la fontaine des Chinois, hésita une autre fois avant de choisir une autre fois la droite; il descendit la rue du Corbeau, traversa la voie ferrée, arriva au pied de la montagne d’Italie, choisit sa première gauche en empruntant l’avenue des Aérogares jusqu’à l’Abécédaire. (12)

He crossed Bougainvillea street and Frangipani alley and arrived in front of the
Chinese fountain, hesitated once more before making another right turn; he went down Crow street, crossed the railway line, and arrived at the foot of Italy mountain. He chose the first left turn while following Airport avenue right up to the Alphabet Primer.

Ideophones and onomatopoeias present yet another problem in translating African literature. Although Labou Tansi does not use many of these forms in his writing, a translator of his work still has to be alive to their presence in the text. In Les yeux du volcan, for instance, he describes the noise made by roosters in the following terms:

Au-dehors, les coqs avaient commencé leur concert d’engueulades pour marquer la fin de la première moitié du jour.
- Kokodi hé ko! (102)

Two remarks can be made about this passage. In the first place, Labou Tansi does not characterize a cockcrow as a triumphant cry, the way it is understood in French, and he does not use the standard French ideophone “cocorico!” to represent the sound made by the rooster. Thus, the fact that he describes cockcrow as a noisy disturbance and elects to transcribe the local ideophone of the cockcrow attests to his design to emphasize the African specificity of his text. For this reason, rendering “Kokodi hé ko!” as “cock-a-doodle-do” not only would be inappropriate, because it would ascribe to the text an English context it does not have, but it also would destroy the African foundation upon which the text is based. The best strategy, in my opinion, is to leave the Congolese onomatopoeic sound in the English text in much the same way as the author has done in the French:

Outside the house, the roosters had started their chorus of noisy disturbances to signal the end of the first half of the day.
“Kokodi hé ko!”

Another problem encountered in the translation process concerns the translation of songs from French into English. As I have already pointed out earlier, the author himself has elected to translate some of these songs from the local language into the French narrative. Although he does not always provide the Lingala or Kikongo original, it is obvious that he has been able to achieve a certain rhythm and rhyme in the French. Let us take two examples to illustrate this point:

Viens voir
Le soleil est tombé fou.
Viens boire
Le ciel qui pisse le jour
Le plus bas du monde
Mange le temps qui passe
Et met tes jambes dans tes yeux. (29)

In this example, the structure of the song is marked by the rhyme scheme ababcde and there is an alliterative sound “t” towards the end of the song: “le temps, tes jambes, tes yeux.” Unfortunately, in an English translation, it is difficult to obtain this poetic quality that the author achieves in his French translation of a Lingala song. Because it is not possible to achieve the same stylistic qualities as those of the author, the translation should focus more on the meaning of the song rather than on its structure and style:

Come and see
The sun has gone mad.
Come and drink
The sky that gushes
The lowest day in the world
Consume the passing time
And put your legs in your eyes.

The second example, which the narrator describes as a song of solidarity, builds on the poetic qualities mentioned above. The whole song is based on a rhythm of assonance /ou/ and alliteration /t/. As in the previous example, it was impossible to transfer this quality from French into English. Here is the French version:

Foutez la merde
Nous foutrons la paix

Translation Review
And here goes my translation:

Screw up everything
We will screw up peace
Botch up everything
We will screw up happiness
It’s the time of reckoning
Every minute is a head
Get rid of fear
We will screw up everything on its head.

Thus, in the two examples quoted above, my strategy was to capture the tone and meaning of Labou Tansi’s language, because it would be impossible to transfer his very personal style into the English version.

I have already mentioned Labou Tansi’s skill at creating new words and shifting the meaning of existing ones. Fortunately, the meaning of some of the words he creates can be discerned from the immediate context in which they are used. Let us look at the following example:

Pour nous, tout était clair: nous vivions dans un bordel dont les Autorités étaient au-dessus des lois. Nous pensions même que nos Autorités étaient devenues “légi-vores.” Celui qui avait un rien d’autorité le montrait en grignotant la Constitution ou les articles du Code civil. (20)

In this quotation it is easy to see that “légivores” is a combination of “legal” and the Latin word “vorare” (to devour). For this reason, it is not difficult to translate “légivores” as “legivorous,” because the sound of the English word will create the same effect as the French:

For us, everything was clear: we were living in a brothel whose Authorities were above the law. We even thought that our Authorities had become “legivorous.” Anybody who had a tiny bit of authority flaunted it by nibbling at the Constitution or the articles of the civil code.

The same reasoning can be made for a word like “Pleurotte.” From the context in which it is used, this word can be said to mean “Crybaby.” However, I opted to translate it as “Pleurotus” in order to maintain the sound quality. Although “pleur” in “Pleurotus” does not convey the meaning of crying in English as it does in the French word “Pleurotte,” readers of the English version can still get the meaning from the context in which it is used:

Nous avions oublié l’inoubliable, car il arrivait sans cesse au colonel Nola de pleurer, à telle enseigne que certaines langues l’appelaient en silence colonel “Pleurotte.” (37)

We had forgotten the unforgettable, for Colonel Nola could never stop weeping, so much so that some folks were secretly calling him “Pleurotus.”

In other instances, it is clear that Labou Tansi uses certain words in a personal way while exploiting the meaning of those words in normal usage. We shall take one example to illustrate this point:

“Je vous ai gouvernés, messieurs, et voici que vous chiez sur mon cousin de confiance. Quelle mocherie!” (40)

In this quotation, it can be recognized that although “mocherie” is the author’s own creation, it is based on an actual word “moche,” meaning “ugly” or “rotten.” What the speaker alludes to in the above passage, however, is not simply the notion of ugliness or rottenness but also an attitude of ungratefulness. On the basis of this interpretation, I translated the passage as follows:

“Gentlemen, I have governed you well and now you shit on my trustworthy cousin. What
a rotten and ungrateful bunch!”

Sometimes when Labou Tansi uses a word of his own creation or a word from an African language, he cushions their meaning in the course of the narrative. For instance, when Colonel Pedro Gazani refuses the drink offered by Warrant Officer Benoît Goldmann, he produces his own drink and explains:

“J’appelle ça le ‘kabronahata’: une invention de mes méninges. Ça pisse moins fort que votre gnôle. Et c’est dur comme du métal.”

In this example, the word “kabronahata” presents no difficulty, because the author provides an explanation:

“I call this ‘kabronahata’: my brain-child. You piss less often than your hooch. And it is as strong as metal.”

Like other African writers, Labou Tansi makes use of proverbs or sayings to explain and to illustrate speech. The translator has to recognize these sayings and render them in an appropriate manner. For instance when the mayor pays a visit to the giant, he starts their deliberations with a local proverb. And, as is often the case in such situations, the reply from the giant is also couched in the form of a proverb:

- Nos ancêtres disaient qu’on n’as pas le droit de renvoyer un étranger, dit le maire en proposant un cigare à l’homme.
- Vous avez eu des ancêtres intelligents, dit le colosse qui refusa le cigare. Mes ancêtres à moi ont dit qu’on ne doit pas aller sous l’eau les yeux grands ouverts. (65)

To be adequate, the English translation must capture the structure and tone of the African sayings:

“Our ancestors say that no one has the right to send a stranger away,” said the mayor as he offered the man a cigar.

“Your ancestors were very intelligent,” said the giant, who refused the cigar. “My ancestors say that one must not go under water with one’s eyes wide open.”

Although the last sentence could be translated as “my ancestors say that you must look before you leap,” doing so will destroy the primacy of the African idiom that the author establishes in the narrative.

Aside from the difficulty in finding the appropriate English words for the individual words that Labou Tansi uses, the greatest problem that faces the translator of Labou Tansi’s work is the task of transferring the quality of his language, the ways in which he manipulates the alien and potentially alienating French language into an adequate and appropriate English medium. A good number of the passages in *Les yeux du volcan* point to this assertion. There are instances of what may be called “francongolais,” that is, the use of French in a Congolese context whose “equivalent” in English is very difficult to determine. Let us look at the following sentences contained in the admonition of Jean-Paul II to the authorities of Hondo-Norte: “Foutez la merde que vous pouvez, tuez qui vous voulez dans votre enclos.... Foutez la viande que vous voulez! Laissez la lumière en paix, messieurs” (17). I translated this as “Screw up everything, you can kill whoever you want in your little corner... Kill all the flesh that you damn well please! But gentlemen, leave the light alone.” Let us look at this turn of phrase the author uses to describe a sleepless night: “Quelle cuite d’enculé nous nous sommes donnée la nuit dernière! Nous n’avons pas fermé l’œil avant la troisième rigolade de Lydie” (58), which I translated as “What a terrible night we had last night! We didn’t sleep a wink before Lydie’s third laugh.” I have to admit that my English translation of these sentences is not as forceful as the French. One really gets the impression that something is missing, even though the translation is still an attempt to capture Labou Tansi’s unique style and meaning.

Another problem that confronts the translator of Labou Tansi’s text is finding appropriate English
words for the different language registers present in the French. In *Les yeux du volcan*, not only does the Congolese writer use popular terms like “foutez,” “enculé,” and “badinez” throughout the text, he also resorts to the use of slang terms like “zigoto,” (a strange looking individual), “pognon,” (money), and “baraqué” (to be well-built), as well as such technical terms as “bousingot” (leather hat), “vésanie” (insanity), and “lagotriche” (woolly monkey). An effective translation of *Les yeux du volcan* will therefore be one in which the translator is not only familiar with the African context of the narrative but also sensitive to the different shades of meaning that Labou Tansi manipulates in his use of the French language.

Quite obviously, in the translation of Labou Tansi’s text, as indeed in any African literary text, Western definitions of equivalence should be approached with caution, because the translator of an African literary text is concerned with establishing not only equivalence of natural language but rather of artistic procedures. For an African text, these procedures cannot be considered in isolation but rather must be located within the specific cultural-temporal context within which they are used. Without doubt, the creative manipulation of English and French in postcolonial Anglophone and Francophone literatures makes it necessary to challenge and redefine many accepted notions in translation theory. Because these postcolonial texts are a hybrid of indigenous and imported modes of storytelling and because of the linguistic and cultural layering within them, conventional notions of equivalence, or ideas of loss and gain, that have long dominated western translation theory are in and of themselves inadequate as translation tools. Indeed, as Samia Mehrez has pointed out, “because the ultimate goal of such literatures is to subvert hierarchies by bringing together the ‘dominant’ and the ‘repressed’ by exploding and confounding different symbolic worlds and separate systems of signification to create a mutual intersignification, their translation must of necessity confront, redefine, and in the process deconstruct existing translation theories.” An African literary text has both an autonomous (in the sense of being based on African culture) and a communicative (the cross-fertilization of the different languages) character to it. The translator must therefore bear in mind both its autonomous and its communicative aspects, and any theory of translation should take both elements into account.

**Works Cited**


Book Reviews


Gregory Conti, Reviewer

Like his earlier essay on the interpretation of narrative prose, *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), Umberto Eco’s latest book of literary criticism is based on a series of lectures, this time in Ontario rather than Massachusetts, delivered when he was Emilio Goglio Visiting Professor in the Department of Italian Studies of the University of Toronto in October 1998. Though based on three lectures, the book is divided into two parts: “Translating and Being Translated” and “Translation and Interpretation.” Notwithstanding the insightful and entertaining accounts of his experience as translator and (above all) as “translatee” presented in part one, the title of part two is more representative of the book’s overall content. Before he became a best-selling international novelist and sometime translator, Eco was, and still is perhaps, most renowned as a semiotician, and his interest in and mastery of the science of interpreting signs informs his discussion of translation.

To be sure, Eco’s reflections on the species of literary translation and its relationship to the larger genus of interpretation will be of interest to both practitioners and theoreticians. Part one begins with an anecdote that is emblematic of Eco’s approach to translation and at the same time a tribute to his English-language translator, William Weaver:

“In my novel *Foucault’s Pendulum* there is, at a certain moment, the following dialogue… [for which a] literal translation in English would be:

Diotallevi – God created the world by speaking. He didn’t send a telegram.
Belbo – Fiat lux, stop.
Casaubon – Epistle follows.”

Eco comments that this translation is “faithful” without being “literal” because while changing the denotations of the original, it preserves the connotations. The English text is different from the Italian but “in spite of this, the English text says exactly what I wanted to say, that is, that my three characters were joking on serious matters—and a literal translation would have made the joke less perspicuous.” (pp. 7-8)

Having established, in this entertaining fashion, the importance of the elementary distinction between the denotive and connotative sense of the text, Eco goes on to develop his thesis that the heart of translation is interpretation: “Translations do not concern a comparison between two languages but the interpretation of two texts in two different languages.” The argument proceeds mostly, though not exclusively, through a series of binary oppositions—“Incommensurability versus Comparability,” “Source versus Target,” “Foreignizing and Domesticating,” “Archaic versus Modern”—which allow Eco to touch on the major issues in recent translation studies while gradually refining and substantiating the role of the translator as an interpreter of literary texts: “We decide how to translate, not on the basis of the dictionary, but on the basis of the whole history of two literatures”…, “[T]ranslating is not only connected with linguistic competence, but with intertextual, psychological, and narrative competence” (pp 13-14), and finally, my favorite, “Interpreting means making a
bet on the sense of the text...Of course the whole history of a culture assists the translator in making relatively safe bets...yet any interpretation remains a bet” (pp. 16-17).

As this last comment illustrates, Eco is aware of the risks involved in literary interpretation, and he is always careful to point out the multiplicity and complexity of meanings inherent in the text. The art of translation, then, consists in identifying which meanings a translation should preserve “at all costs” and then to render those meanings in the “target” text. Eco uses the phrase “at all costs” advisedly. Through a series of examples ranging from the Bible and War and Peace, to English, German, French, Portuguese, and Russian translations of his own novels, in addition to his own Italian translations of two French works, Eco presents a strong case for translators allowing themselves considerable leeway with the literal sense of the original in the interest of preserving its “deeper meaning.” The translators of a vivid description of an underwater scene in The Island of the Day Before, for example, were told by Eco to feel free to choose their own words for color and shape to describe the scene, as long as they succeeded in rendering the “rhythm and vivacity” that constituted the deep meaning of the scene. The Russian translator of The Name of the Rose used ecclesiastical Slavic terms to obtain the archaic effect created for western readers of Eco’s original Medieval Latin. The author defends the translator’s change of the original, noting that, “in order to make the translation archaic it was necessary to domesticate it.”

Preservation of the deep meaning of the original at the expense of its literal language is the guidepost for Eco’s translator in interpreting the text. His roots in semiotics come to the fore when he uses scientific language to formulate his thesis in relation to Foucault’s Pendulum:

Every sentence (or short sequence of sentences) of a discourse conveying a story can be summarized (or interpreted) by a micro-proposition…The micro-propositions can be embedded in larger macro-propositions. . . . The whole novel could be summarized by a hyper-macro-proposition that reads: “For fun, three friends invent a cosmic plot, and the story they imagined comes true.” …A first hypothesis is that one can change the literal meaning of the single sentences in order to preserve the meaning of the corresponding micro-propositions, but not the sense of major macro-propositions. …One could decide, for example, that if character A tells a long stupid joke and if no literal translation can render the stupidity of the joke, a translator is entitled to switch to another joke, provided it remains clear that A tells silly jokes. It is on the basis of interpretive decisions of this kind that translators play the game of faithfulness. (pp. 38-39)

The strength of this scientific metaphor of micro- and macro-propositions is its ability to streamline some of the complexity of literary narrative, and it enables Eco to convert his theory into useful practical advice for translators. Its weakness, however, at least in this translator’s opinion, is its tendency to favor the universal characteristics of the “deep meaning” over the particular details of cultural references that contribute to the unique identity of the original. To illustrate this point, let me use one of Eco’s examples.

In the section entitled “Sameness in Reference,” Eco recounts a difficulty in translating an Italian cultural reference in Foucault’s Pendulum. During a description of a drive in the hills, Diotallevi observes that endless vistas opened up “beyond the hedge.” Eco points out that the hedge is a reference to Giacomo Leopardi’s sonnet “L’infinito,” the most famous poem of Italian romanticism and part of the standard Italian public school curriculum. Since foreign readers probably would not catch this reference to Italian literature, Eco told his translators to use a literary reference from their own culture. In the English version, Weaver simply substituted Keats for Leopardi—“we glimpsed endless vistas. Like Darien…. “Thus,” Eco concludes, “to preserve the psychological sense of the text (and to render it understandable within the framework of the receiving cultures), translators
were entitled, not only to make radical changes to the literal meaning of the original text, but also to its reference…. Only by this maneuver can the translator suggest what seems to be the ‘deep sense’ of the story, that is, a psychological feature of the character—Diotallevi can enjoy a landscape only through the poetical experience of somebody else.”

It may seem bold to contradict the author with regard to the “deep meaning” of his own text, but one cannot help but wonder whether the Italian character’s reference to his native literary culture is not indicative of an equally essential feature of his psyche. Not only is Diotallevi a culture snob who is able to perceive nature only through poetry, but he perceives it through Italian poetry, which he learned in a certain kind of Italian family and in Italian schools. Substituting Keats for Leopardi may, in fact, not preserve the psychological meaning of the passage, or it may preserve its universal aspects at the expense of the particular. This preference for the universal tends to run throughout Eco’s examples, and it seems to derive from the scientific approach of the semiotician rather than the artistic approach of the novelist.

In part two of the book, Eco examines the relationship of translation to interpretation, and here the semiotician comes to center stage as the translator retreats to the wings. After a brief review of Jakobson and Peirce’s theories of interpretation, Eco concludes that translation should not be identified with interpretation but is better viewed as a species of the larger genus of interpretation, which includes all forms of intralinguistic and interlinguistic formulations, from transcription through transmutation (films based on novels, comic strips of the Divine Comedy, etc). This taxonomy of interpretation, and Eco’s explanations of translation’s place in the classification, will be useful to scholars in translation studies, particularly those interested in comparing literary translation to other forms of interpretation, such as musical performance, film and theater adaptation, or parody.

A final word about the graceful translation of Eco’s rhetorical style as rendered here by Alastair McEwen. All the way through Experiences in Translation, the reader has the sensation of listening to a skillful and engaging lecturer. This is no doubt partly due to Eco’s own mastery of the anecdotal style of oral presentation. McEwen succeeds, however, in preserving Eco’s Italian professorial style, retaining Latinate words whenever possible—“paronomasia” instead of pun, “perspicuous” instead of clear, “hypotyposis” instead of vivid description—and adhering to an authoritative yet genteel formal register. The examples cited here from McEwen’s translation are probably the only words capable of rendering Eco’s boundless erudition, but one is also left with the impression that they successfully capture the “deep sense” of the lecturer’s persona.

The Love You Promised Me by Silvia Molina.

Patricia Schoch, Reviewer

Silvia Molina is a prolific and critically acclaimed contemporary Mexican writer. She has written 10 children’s books, three collections of short stories, a one-act play, two volumes of essays, and five novels. Only four of her short stories and two of her novels have been translated into English; the first novel, La mañana debe seguir gris, originally published in 1977, was translated by John and Ruth Mitchell in 1993, and her most recent novel, El amor que me juraste, winner of the 1999 Sor Juana de la Cruz Prize of the Guadalajara International Book Fair, has now been translated by David Unger.

Most of Molina’s previous novels have dealt with themes of Mexican women in search of their identity against a backdrop of contemporary Mexican political upheaval that is interwoven with Mexican history. Although in a recent interview, Molina denied that her writing style is similar to that...
of the La Onda writers of the 1960s, like them she peppers her text with foreign words and nontraditional language (García 114). In The Love You Promised Me, Molina combines her love of history, literature, and music in a rich, intertextual and multilingual tapestry with her familiar theme of a woman seeking self-realization and independence in the aftermath of a failed love affair. The outer frame of the novel consists of the first-person narrator, Marcela, rereading the letters she exchanged with her ex-lover. The inner frame is Marcela’s search for her own identity by discovering the secret of her father’s estrangement from his family. Molina uses the voice of a woman speaking her thoughts aloud to create an intimate, informal atmosphere in the novel.

Unger’s translation of El amor que me juraste, The Love You Promised Me, successfully transplants this intimate tone through the use of contractions and an informal level of diction. See, for example, a passage in which Marcela is reflecting not only on her relationship with her now-deceased mother but also on her relationship with her ex-lover. Molina’s original Spanish reads:

De pronto, alguien como Eduardo te dice que ha dejado de quererte (un hecho) y tu cariño ya no tiene lugar ni razón de ser, y no hay dónde guardarlo ni protegerlo. No te sirve, no sabes qué hacer con él, ya no es sino, algo inservible de lo cual debes deshacerte. (El Amor 34)

Unger’s translation of these lines captures the informal tone and also retains Molina’s italicized emphases:

Someone like Eduardo all of a sudden tells you that he doesn’t love you anymore (done deal) and your affection has no rhyme or reason to be and there’s no place to put it or justify it. It’s of no use. You don’t know what to do with it, it no longer is, except as something pointless which you must get rid of immediately. (The Love 23)

The use of the parenthetical “(done deal)” and the familiar “you” creates an intimacy with the reader. It is as if we are hearing Marcela think aloud. Unger’s translation reflects this stream-of-consciousness technique combined with the shifts in diction level throughout the novel that are symptomatic of Marcela’s inner conflict as she rereads Eduardo’s love letters and searches for the root causes of her father’s estrangement from his family.

In addition, Unger preserves the Mexican flavor of the original by incorporating certain of Molina’s Mexican terms in a manner that is easily recognizable to the English reader. One of his strongest examples of communicating Mexican culture through untranslated words occurs in a discussion of Mexican textiles. Molina’s original Spanish passage reads:

Los viajes de Ilona por los pueblos de México le mantenían vivo el aprecio por lo mexicano y le fueron dando al mismo tiempo esa colección de textiles piezas de Talavera, de La Granja, vidrio con pintura dorada, jarrones para pulque, piezas de hierro forjado . . . objetos en su mayoría de estilo colonial. (El Amor 104)

Unger’s English translation places in italics the words of the original for such Mexican cultural artifacts as the famous Talavera ceramics from Puebla and the La Granja ceramics of Guadalajara.

Ilona’s trips to Mexican villages kept her appreciation of Mexican culture alive and also helped her develop a collection of textiles, Talavera and La Granja ceramics, gold painted glass, pulque jars, wrought iron—objects that were mostly from the colonial period. (The Love 88)

Unger’s decision to maintain the terms Talavera, La Granja, and pulque recreates the Mexican flavor of the original and serves to build a bridge between the cultures. This technique, however, was not original to the translation. Molina uses the same technique with English words in the original novel when she describes an American brick-
making system based on Mexican Indian techniques:

A su regreso California, la patentó: *The Soskay System*, y más adelante abrió su propia compañía: *Concrete Products Mould Co.* Apenas se casó Eduardo con Ilona, Bernard Soskay trató de convencerlo de introducir *The Soskay System* en México, pero Eduardo no se interesó. (*El Amor* 100-1)

Thus, both Molina in her original writing and Unger in his translation underscore the growing influence their two cultures are having on each other.

Moreover, the central theme of the novel turns on this technique, accentuating the influence of American culture in Mexico. In Chapter 1, Molina introduces a verse in English from an American song that she hears while alone in a hotel room in her father’s hometown, which she has never visited before. The song is coming from the next room in the hotel, a room occupied by American honeymooners. Molina writes:

> De tanto oír aquella balada, me la había aprendido y comenzaba a desesperarme:

> *There was a boy,*  
> *a very strange and enchanted boy,*  
> *They say he wandered very far,*  
> *very far, over land and sea . . .* (*El Amor* 12)

Molina weaves this verse in English throughout the novel to punctuate her search for her father’s family in the small Mexican fishing town of San Lázaro. She has gone alone to San Lázaro to confront not only her father’s mysterious past but also her own troubled present, which involves guilt over her affair with a married man. The verse echoes her doubts and loneliness:

> Afuera, miraba desde la cama la noche era clara y si no hubiera sido por la canción que salía del cuarto de junto no habría sentido ganas de llorar:

> *And while we spoke of many things, fools and kings, this he said to me:*  
> *The greatest thing you’ll ever learn is to love and be loved in return.* (*El Amor* 19)

Unger translates Molina’s introduction to this American song as follows:

> From my bed, I could see it was a cloudless night. If it weren’t for the music from the room next door, I wouldn’t have felt like crying.

> . . . and while we spoke of many things . . . .

(*The Love* 8)

Molina repeatedly juxtaposes this verse against Marcela’s failure to communicate with her husband and children. In the end, Marcela comes to the realization that she is repeating the sins of her father in her infidelity to her own family:

> ¿Por qué me hería? Porque me obligaba a pensar en mi padre. En aquel hoven que dejó todo por mi mamá; y luego tuvo otra familia. Quizás entendiéndolo podría entenderme, justificarme, arrepentirme. (*El Amor* 163)

Unger’s translation embodies the tortured tone of Molina’s original:

> Why did this music bother me? Because it reminded me of my father, the young man who left everything to go with my mother and then started a second family. Perhaps understanding him, I could begin to understand myself, absolve myself, and repent. (*The Love* 145)

Thus, both the original author and the translator create works that not only resonate with the flavor of both cultures but also use foreign words in juxtaposition as counterpoint to the central theme of the novel.

Unger’s English translation of Molina’s Spanish text also reminds us that each language is a way of interpreting the world and that the actions in one lan-
Language are not always perceived the same way in another language or culture. As Gregory Rabassa has written, “cocks do not crow alike in the ears of different peoples” (2). Unger was faced with a similar dilemma in this translation. “Taaaaannnnn taaaaannnnnn,” Molina’s church bells chime in the following passage:

El despertar de la ciudad ocupó entonces mi imaginación y divagué para no pensar ni en Eduardo ni en Rafael, al que había olvidado hablar por la noche, ni en mis hijos ni en nada que me recordara mi confusión, porque me agradaba el efecto de calma que tenían aquellas llamadas: taaaannnnn, taaannnnnn. (El Amor 49)

Unger translates these lines as follows:

The town awakening occupied my thoughts, and I let it, so I wouldn’t have to think about Eduardo or Rafael—I’d forgotten to call him the night before—or about my children or anything that would bewilder me because I was enjoying the calming effect of the clanging of the bells. (The Love 36)

By omitting the sound taaaannnnn, taaaannnnnn from his English version, Unger relinquishes Molina’s playful exploration of language in the original work. Thus, Unger’s translation decision parallels Rabassa’s—church bells do not toll alike in Mexico and the United States.

As mentioned above, Unger consistently recreates the narrator’s conversational tone, even in instances when the diction level becomes uneven. At times, however, Unger’s translation choices exaggerate the variances in tone. For instance, Marcela says, “I was getting ticked off, he seemed like such a rustic historian” (The Love 107). The original Spanish line reads, “...—me comenzaba a exasperar. Creí que era un historiador de pueblo” (El Amor 123). The term “ticked off” is of a somewhat lower diction level than the original “me comenzaba a exasperar” or “I started to get exasperated.” Furthermore, “ticked off” creates a jarring juxtaposition with the very formal “rustic historian” that occurs later in the same sentence. A different equivalent to “rustic historian,” such as “hick historian,” might have been more parallel with Unger’s choice to use “ticked off,” a lower diction level translation of the verb “exasperar.”

Although Unger’s use of contractions contributes to the informal tone in English, at times their frequency distracts the reader. For instance, Unger repeatedly combines the word “would” with other auxiliaries. He translates “Mi mamá me pedía” (El Amor 89) as “My mother’d ask me” (The Love 75). He also translates “Mi bisabuelo habría tenido esa clase de monedas para pagarle a los trabajadores de sus haciendas, y le hubiera gustado pagarle a mi madre con un puño de ellas, para que olvidara a mi papa” (El Amor 94) as “My great-grandfather would’ve used those coins to pay the workers at his haciendas, and he would’ve liked to pay my mother a fistful of coins to forget my father” (The Love 80). Although Spanish is a highly inflected language whose structure combines the auxiliary with the verb, in this instance, contracting “would” with “mother” and “have” is not a typical treatment in written English.

Overall, Unger’s translation successfully recreates the intimate conversational tone of Molina’s novel. In addition, by including Spanish cultural terms, Unger stays true to Molina’s technique of weaving English into the text of her novel. Although at times the diction level is uneven, it can be argued that Molina’s original diction level is intentionally uneven, and thus, Unger’s translation faithfully reflects this deliberate tonal disparity. In essence, Unger succeeds in capturing both the intercultural and intracultural nuances of Molina’s original work.

Works Cited


Joanne H. Stroud, Reviewer

The Station Hill Blanchot Reader, published in 1999, brings together the literary essays and parts of most of the books of fiction of Maurice Blanchot that Station Hill has translated over the past 20 years. For the reader unfamiliar with Blanchot, born in France in 1907 and author of some 35 books of fiction and literary and philosophical discourse, this collection provides an easy access. His enormous importance for contemporary literature and thought, like that of his fellow countryman, Gaston Bachelard, is just now being recognized by English-speaking readers. A chronology of his works in French and lists of his works and secondary literature in English may be found on the Web at http://lists.village.virginia.edu/~spoons/blanchot/blanchot_mainpage.htm.

When one picks up the Station Hill Reader, it is difficult to decide which to read first, the fiction or the nonfiction sections. Although they are listed second, I found myself first reading the literary essays, with their provocative and subtle discussions of how writing means. Many of these are from The Gaze of Orpheus and Other Literary Essays, translated brilliantly by Lydia Davis. Blanchot’s line of thought in many of these is dense and complicated, so it is greatly to her credit that she is clear and precise in rendering them from French into English. Blanchot’s complicated sentences could have become tedious instead of intriguing. In “Literature and the Right to Death,” Blanchot questions why one writes at all. Here is part of his musing: “Let us suppose that literature begins at the moment when literature becomes a question.” The “why” of writing is only the writer’s personal problem until the page is written. But “as soon as the page has been written, the question which kept interrogating the writer while he was writing—though he may not have been aware of it—is now present on the page; and now the same question lies silent within the work, waiting for the reader to approach—any kind of reader, shallow or profound; this question is addressed to language, behind the person who is writing and the person who is reading, by language which has become literature.” The baroque sentence above is just one example of how easy it would have been to completely lose the interest of the reader without the skillful control of the material by the translator. In the process of putting words to page, the work has gone, Blanchot reminds us, from “what Hegel calls the pure joy of passing from the night of possibility into the daytime of presence.” Blanchot enjoys discussing the process of writing.

As in the essay “Literature and the Right to Death,” Blanchot’s meta-text in his works of fiction often is the subject of how death plays into the daily living process. Thomas The Obscure, a work of fiction that I would call a novelette but that he calls an écrit, blurs the line between the living and the dead. I kept being reminded of the poet W. B. Yeats’s line about living each other’s life and dying each other’s death: “Birth-hour and death-hour meet,/ Or, as great sages say,/ Men dance on deathless feet.” Time, eternity, and the obscure separation between reality and imagination are also subjects of equal profundity that Blanchot has the courage to pursue. The awareness of death, unique to the human race, both unites us with others and at the same time, reminds us that we are always actually alone:

Therefore it is accurate to say that when I speak: death speaks in me. My speech is a warning that at this very moment death is loosed in the world, that it has suddenly appeared between me, as I speak, and the being I address: it is there between us as the distance that separates us, but this distance is also what prevents us from being separated, because it contains the condition for all understanding. Death alone allows me to grasp what I want to attain; it exists in words as the only they can have meaning. Without death, everything would sink into absurdity and nothingness. (380)
It is death that humanizes us and that as the most important ingredient in identity, focuses us. In his words, Blanchot explains why the compelling issue of ultimate death defines the life and the work:

And there is no question that we are preoccupied by dying. But why? It is because when we die, we leave behind not only the world but also death. That is the paradox of the last hour. Death works with us in the world; it is a power that humanizes nature, that raises existence to being, and it is within each one of us as our most human quality; it is death only in the world—man only knows death because he is man, and he is only man because he is death in the process of becoming. But to die is to shatter the world; it is the loss of the person, the annihilation of the being; and so it is also the loss of death, the loss of what in it and for me made it death.(392)

Blanchot is concerned with how language becomes communication, often commenting on the difficulties of expression. Blanchot did not address himself directly to the problem of translating Blanchot, but in his essay on Heraclitus, he did speak about the fundamental impulse to “make the obscurity of language respond to the clarity of things.” (L’Entretien infini,122) In referring to the above essay, Robert Lamberton reminds us that Blanchot insisted on “the absolute refusal of the duality of language” and “the absolute opacity of language and the impossibility of translation.”

Although Lamberton did not correspond with Blanchot in his lifetime, Lydia Davis did. In a charming way, Blanchot complimented her and “insisted on the importance of her contribution and on the fact that Death Sentence was, finally, her book.” Lamberton, in hoping to have remained faithful to the text itself (ital), speaks of Blanchot’s “deliberate smokescreen to foil the efforts of both reader and translator, both condemned to try to determine in the context of what tradition of language, of what sort of discourse his own invention is situated.” I am sure that by now you are aware of the many subtle challenges in Blanchot’s writing and can appreciate the task of these three translators. In addition to addressing difficult subjects, Blanchot explores and glorifies paradox. His metaphors are original and surprising. He always demands the closest attention of the reader.

The Station Hill Blanchot Reader is well served by all three of its fine translators. Perhaps it is because individually they are also writers of renown that they can perform this difficult task. Here is what George Quasha has to say in his Publishers Preface: “[W]e feel indebted to the three remarkable writer/translators to whom our opportunity here to read Blanchot in English literally owes everything: Lydia Davis, Robert Lamberton, Paul Auster. In addition to graciously carrying out the notoriously hard work of translating Blanchot—with celebrated brilliant results—they have always been supportive of each other’s work and of the difficulties of independent publishing.” Indeed, these translations and this publication hold many labors of love for which we, the readers, can feel much gratitude.

Jutta and Hildegard: The Biographical Sources.
Translated and introduced by Anna Silvas.

Patricia Schoch, Reviewer

Anna Silvas’s commentaries and translations in this collection of 12th-century Latin documents make significant contributions not only to the field of medieval studies but to the field of translation studies as well. The volume, which chronicles the life and times of the German nun Hildegard of Bingen was originally published in hard cover, in 1998, as part of the Brepols Medieval Women Series on the history of women’s contributions to western culture. Silvas introduces her collection of translations with explanations of the historical context and significance of each. She also comments on the many
challenges she encountered while translating these writings by the medieval authors who were in various ways connected to the life of Hildegard of Bingen.

Hildegard is one of the best-known women of the Middle Ages, along with Joan of Arc, Eleanor of Aquitaine, and Heloise. During her lifetime, Hildegard gained widespread fame as a prophet, preacher, author, composer, healer, scientist, exorcist, church reformer, founder of two convents, and advisor to princes and popes. A mystic, she experienced visions beginning at the age of three. When she was eight years old, her parents, wealthy nobles of Bermersheim in Rhenish Hesse, placed her in the monastery of St. Disibodenberg to be educated in the Benedictine manner with the anchoress Jutta von Sponheim. Hildegard succeeded Jutta, after Jutta’s death in 1136, as abbess of Disibodenberg. At the age of 42, after five more years of seclusion, Hildegard had a particularly disturbing vision. She set about corresponding with St. Bernard of Clairvaux and Pope Eugenius and began her public career after receiving the pope’s permission to begin writing her first visionary work, *Scivias* (Know the Ways). Although her sainthood has never been officially recognized by the Catholic Church, efforts for her canonization were already under way when Hildegard died in 1179, at the age of 81.

Silvas, a faculty member in the Department of Classics and Religion at the University of New England in New South Wales, Australia, and herself a member of the Benedictine order, views Hildegard and Jutta as “inspiring sisters and foremothers” (xiii). In 1984, Silvas became involved in translating the *Vita S. Hildegardis*, one of the official documents preparing the case for Hildegard’s canonization, written shortly after she died. Silvas’s translation of the *Vita S. Hildegardis* first appeared in four installments in *Tjurunga, an Australian Benedictine Review*, between 1985 and 1987. When Brepol published a major critical edition of the *Vita S. Hildegardis* by Monika Klaes in 1993, Tjuranga editors asked Silvas to revise her translation and publish it as a book. In the preface to *Jutta and Hildegard*, Silvas explains that rather than just revising her translation, she decided to expand its scope to include other documents supplementary to the *Vita S. Hildegardis*. The result was *Jutta and Hildegard: The Biographical Sources* (xi).

Silvas’s work in this book centers around her translations of three documents: the recently discovered vita of Hildegard’s spiritual mother, Jutta of Sponheim; a letter containing an unfinished vita of Hildegard by the monk Guibert of Gembloux; and Theodoric of Echternach’s official hagiography, *Vita S. Hildegardis*. Also included in the book is what Silvas calls “a penumbra of supporting documents” that contribute to our knowledge of the lives of Jutta and Hildegard (xviii). Selections from the Chronicles of Disibodenberg reveal significant events, from 975 to 1160 A.D., in Germany and at the monastery that was the home of the two holy women. The *Acta Inquisitionis*, completed in 1233, formally authenticates Hildegard’s sanctity and represents ongoing efforts toward her canonization. Silvas also uses shorter sources to establish the historical and social context of Jutta’s and Hildegard’s lives. She includes legal charters issued by the Archbishops of Mainz for the monasteries of Disibodenberg, Sponheim, and Rupertsberg; the one known letter of the monk Volmar, Hildegard’s secretary and provost; and *Eight Readings*, a contemplative work derived from Theodoric’s *Vita S. Hildegardis*. Except for the *Vita S. Hildegardis*, Silvas’s translations of these biographical sources represent the first time any of them have been translated into English.

Appendices to the collection include maps of the Holy Roman Empire during the 12th century and of the Disibodenberg, Rupertsberg, and Sponheim abbeys. Along with the maps, there are sketches of the ground plans of the Abbey of Disibodenberg and the ruins of Rupertsberg Abbey. There are also genealogical tables tracing both Hildegard’s and Jutta’s family histories. Silvas also includes a comprehensive bibliography that separately lists primary sources, translations, dictionaries, background studies, and selected detailed studies on various facets of Hildegard’s life. In addition, Silvas uses detailed footnotes throughout the text to create a rich subtext of factual information. For example, in the Chronicles of Disibodenberg’s men-
tation of Holy Roman Emperor Henry IV’s excommunication, footnote 32 provides in-depth information of Henry’s problems with the papacy. It reads:

Henry had been excommunicated under Popes Gregory VII, Urban II and Paschal II. When in Rome in 1111, Henry V wrung from Paschal II not only the imperial crown and the concession of lay investiture, but also the posthumous absolution of his father who had died excommunicate. On his return to Germany he held a memorial service for his father on 7 August, 1111, whose body was then interred in the Salian family vault in Speyer Cathedral. (18)

These appendices and notes, along with the introductions’ histories of the physical survival of each of the documents, constitute a compendium that is valuable, in itself, for research in medieval, religion, feminist, and translation studies and should be welcomed by scholars in each of those fields.

It is Silvas’s comments on her translation process that are of particular interest in this venue. She states in her introductory remarks to the collection that she has avoided a “loose, overly ‘interpretive’ approach to translation,” and she emphasizes that she tried to maintain the “different character of each author” as she brought each work into modern Standard English (xxiii). Throughout the book, she shares her insights on translating the medieval documents, often comparing the different styles of Latin she encountered. For example, she speculates that Volmar is the author of Jutta’s hagiography Jutta, which documents Hildegard’s early childhood and the culture of the medieval Benedictine monastery, as “well-schooled, cultivated and distinctly monastic.” She compares this with the “highly skilled classicism” reflected in the Latin in Hildegard’s vita by Guibert (58).

Many of Silvas’s translating challenges hinged on issues of medieval Latin grammar. She observes that Volmar’s writings sometimes contain tangles of construction that broke down in her Modern English translations, especially when she encountered such issues as the ungrammatical use of the reflexive suus-a-um and the mixture of statement and unfulfilled condition. Other translation problems arose with missing elements of infinitives and auxiliary verbs, which, Silvas notes, could have been overlooked by the manuscript’s copyists. She also offers valuable observations on general translating challenges she encountered in the work. “In the way of medieval Latin, ablative gerundives seem to be used as a kind of present active participle, and indeed gerundives are used a great deal. Sometimes a narrative is constructed with a series of ablative absolutes using gerundives in present tense,” she explains (59).

Silvas encountered some of her greatest translating challenges in Guibert’s Letter to Bovo, written at Rupertsberg just before Hildegard died. Guibert came to Hildegard’s Rupertsberg abbey in 1177 to serve as her scribe after the death of Volmar. He remained for a year after Hildegard died, reluctantly returning to Gembloux in 1180 (89). His letters back to Gembloux reveal much detailed information of Hildegard’s life with his Letter to Bovo, written in 1177, which contains an unfinished vita of Hildegard that Silvas speculates was based on the Life of Jutta. Silvas writes that Guibert is a “skilled Latinist,” a “master rhetorician not loth to display his art,” and that his trademark is a “very elaborate periodic style” in which he revels. She writes:

He will weave a single sentence of paragraph length with subordinate and sub-subordinate clauses and phrases, holding the main verb at arm’s length to the very end, while along the way acquitting himself perhaps of two con-
current story lines, or a story line and two or three parallel commentaries. . . It is a good example of form expressing meaning, provided one manages to steer all the way to the end! (96-97)

To translate Guibert’s prose into comprehensible English, Silvas had to divide such sentences into two. She notes that, to break Guibert’s sentences apart, she bypassed various “colouring particles” and the participial form of certain verbs. She describes “long pondering and consultation needed to unravel” the dividing of one particularly complex sentence, which contained word-plays and rhymes—*pungent quam ungeret*—and a variety of sub-plots and sub-sub-plots. She finally found a way to divide the sentence, but did so “very reluctantly, only as a last resort” (97). Silvas’s translation resulted in two lengthy but certainly comprehensible English sentences:

Instead, just as salt when sprinkled in suitable measure tempers the acrid taste of anything it seasons, and just as an excellent wine exhilarates its drinkers by its natural dryness rather than repels them, so whenever this consummately prudent virgin was associated with anyone through friendship or conversation, she did not less stimulate her hearers than soothe them by her words and writings fitted to the occasion, for she had a vivid quality, devoid of flattery. Thus, as I say, she caused the minds of all who came into contact with her to ferment with the leaven of divine righteousness. (113)

Silvas saves her discussion of the nuances of bringing select words from their medieval texts into English for her translation comments in the introduction to the *Vita S. Hildegardis*, which forms the central core of the book. “After ‘living’ with these documents over a period of time,” she writes, “the translator may be allowed to offer some observations on translating… .” Among the words she targets is *visio*, which can refer to particular instances of such paranormal experiences as visions and revelations or to the visionary gift itself—a type of “waking clairvoyance which can be tapped at will.” Silvas notes that she maintains the double meaning of *visio* with the single English word “vision” (129). She includes a detailed discussion of both anthropological and religious issues involved in translating various Latin terms for “woman”: *virgo*, which connotes a sense of the holy; *puella*, for a girl, a young woman, an unmarried or newly married woman, or a maiden; *matrona* for a married woman; and *mulier* or *femina* as a generic term for woman. She includes the same type of discussion for translating *homo*, which Hildegard often uses in reference to herself as an object of divine revelation. Silvas describes her treatment of *homo* when it is in juxtaposition with spiritual beings, either explicitly or implicitly, as requiring a specific, rather than broad, translation.

Here the distinctly human character of “*homo*” must be brought out . . . In such cases, standard English is followed…and the singular *homo* is translated as the generic (i.e. inclusive) “man” without article. When *homo* is used of a particular person, then in the case of a woman, notably Hildegard, I translate it as “human being” or in one particularly hieratic situation . . . “human creature” . . . (131)

Silvas expands her translator’s insights with similar discussions of words such as *frater*, *soror*, *cenobium*, *monasterium*, *obsessa*, and *amicita*.

From a translator’s perspective, Silvas’s comprehensive work would have been made even more complete if it had included, perhaps in another appendix, facsimile reproductions of a sampling of the original 12th-century manuscripts with which she worked. Notwithstanding this single possible addition, *Jutta and Hildegard: The Biographical Sources* succeeds in its mission to bring these medieval documents into eminently readable standard English. In so doing, it also represents a multifaceted achievement in a variety of fields as disparate as medieval and feminist studies. In this way, Silvas’s *Jutta and Hildegard: The Biographical Sources* could be considered a reflection of the vastly multifaceted life of Hildegard of Bingen herself.
Although he has a reputation for being one of the few American poets who write notably well in both Spanish and English, Tino Villanueva does not usually translate his own work. He is, however, generous and exacting with his translators. To my own pleasure I found that out first-hand when I started working on his *Crónica de mis años peores* (La Jolla: Lalo, 1987), a collection of meditative poems on his youth that I translated as *Chronicle of My Worst Years* (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1994). I should also point out that, when it was still in typescript, I saw his most recent volume, *Primera Causa*, published now in a bilingual edition with a translation, *First Cause*, by Lisa Horowitz. I mention these matters for two reasons: I know Villanueva’s work well, and I also know how attentive he is to his translator’s efforts, sometimes even to the extent that the translation process becomes not only a collaborative effort but also, in several relatively minor places, a revision of the original work. One should keep that latter element in mind when assessing what Lisa Horowitz has done in her consistently effective translation. Getting nit-picky about some of the translated phrases would likely be unfair and even inaccurate when one considers the possibility that a translation can become, at least in part, a revision—if the writer is an active participant in the process.

In his two collections immediately previous to *Primera Causa*—*Crónica de mis años peores* and the American Book Award–winning *Scene From The Movie Giant* (Willimantic, CT: Curbstone, 1993)—Villanueva kept his dramatic situations vivid while he meditated on concerns associated with his youth. In *Crónica*, details about the migratory farmworker’s life are sharply presented; and in *Scene* (written in English), that same attention to event is intense. In *Primera Causa/First Cause*, however, we find Villanueva turning almost altogether meditative as he examines his own experience with writing and memory. Without belaboring the matter, he employs liturgical points of phrase and concern, something he has done in other works as well. In fact, his work reflects a subtly sacramental approach that some of his most supportive readers have missed. The result of the liturgical points of reference is an evocation of the sacred, even the prophetic, in his sensibility. Rather than giving us the fully polished evocation of sacramental matters in *Primera Causa/First Cause*, however, Villanueva takes us into the stages of germination, during which will and discipline are admittedly often more prominent than inspiration. The third of the ten poems in the chapbook, “Teoría de la redención” (“Theory of Redemption”), illustrates Villanueva’s dual motifs of prophecy and craftsmanship when he refers to the

...estancias de me historia
que me están llamando,
a la vez que me cargo encima estos recuerdos
con voluntad de epifanía

...chapters of my history
calling me,
while I take on layers of memory
with a will that’s bent on epiphany.

Something similar, but even subtler, occurs in “Primera causa que me nombra” (“First Cause To Name Me”) when he uses versículos instead of versos to suggest a liturgical quality of intent. In her translation, however, Horowitz goes for a secular tone by using verses instead of versicles. Nevertheless, because in usage neither word is associated exclusively with the secular or religious, Horowitz has certainly done no violence to the text; and here, as well as elsewhere, her choices are defensible.

Throughout this rather short but richly contemplative collection, Villanueva sees language in ways that are parallel to Martin Heidegger’s understanding, articulated both succinctly and provocatively when he says in *What Is Called Thinking? (Was Heisst Denken?)*: “Language speaks.” A concept like that is worth noting because in Villanueva’s book,
language is not considered primarily a tool for naming concepts and phenomena but is seen, as in Heidegger, as a dimension of perception itself. The ten poems in this collection are not about things “over there” off the page so much as they are about the process of reflection dramatized on the page.

Several phrases in “Qué me valga la memoria” (“May Memory Help Me”) illustrate ways in which Villanueva sees language as a framer of consciousness: “no puedo prescindir / de las palabras” (“I can’t get along / without words”); “El pensamiento es largo, así sucede — / apenas recuerdo y lo escribo” (“Thinking is a process, long and slow — / remembering, bit by bit, and writing as I go”). The form of the rhyming couplet in Horowitz’ version (slow /... go) does not seem accidental or arbitrary but an appropriate echo of the prominently placed long o’s in the Spanish. A similar stylistic echo is found at the end of “Más la voz que el tiempo” (“Voice Over Time”) when Horowitz matches Villanueva’s half-rhyme “se ha ido / ... el tiempo” with “stayed behind / ... over time.” Although appearing with some frequency in both the Spanish and English versions, the musical qualities of sound are more subtle and irregularly placed than prominent and formal, just as they often are, for example, in the poetry of William Carlos Williams. Horowitz, then, is being fair in her translations; she does not try to impose an alien music on her subject.

Time and again in his work, Villanueva has conveyed a curiously solitary voice, the speech of one thinking in the context of oneself. There is a major difference, though, between aloneness and loneliness. It’s the former that applies to Villanueva, but in many ways we would expect that from one so inclined toward the contemplative. What seems especially striking about his voice is the muscular quality of the sensibility. He even has what one might well call a Protestant sense of will. All these matters are strikingly present in “Teoría de la redención” (“Theory of Redemption”). Links between the formal and aggressive in the poem’s opening lines show this:

Cuán largo el viaje sobre la tierra,

sobre el terreno represado del recuerdo para arribar a este escritorio para contar ...

What a long journey, this one on earth— recovering the covered ground of memory— just to get to this desk to declare ...

In the poem’s concluding lines, he extends the earlier-mentioned emphasis on will and an inclination to perceive remembered experience in terms of writing when he says:

Aquí mi voluntad se forjará en el fuego del empeño de este puño que marca este papel.

Horowitz’ version of those concluding lines seems especially crisp:

Here my will shall be forged in the fires of persistence—this fist making its mark on this paper.

She seems sensitive to the fact that English rhythms are often more angular than their equivalents in Spanish.

There are, though, questions one periodically has. In “Imaginé un papel” (“I Pictured A Page”), Villanueva says in the third strophe: “Esbocé unas palabras / sobre la imprimatura blanca.” One wonders why Horowitz translated the opening phrase as “I scratched scant words” rather than “I scratched some words.” Scant here seems to suggest the common notion that language is somehow inadequate, whereas Villanueva, throughout the collection, emphasizes that it’s language that gives definition to perception. Villanueva’s autobiographical speaker seems simply to be saying that, in the incident he refers to in the poem, he wrote down some words; he does not seem inclined to comment there on the comparative efficacy of those words. In fact, the poem’s conclusion identifies memory and expression in terms of synonymity, not failed promise: “que cuando [la memoria] acaba, acaba siendo lo que escribo” (“what, when [memory] ends, ends up
being what I write”).

In spite of his sustained meditation, Villanueva is alert enough to give us an incident that is symbolic of a context in which the relationship between language and identity is seen by him as crucial. The penultimate poem “Así dijo el señor” (“And Then He Spoke”) describes, as Villanueva has done in other poems — most notably in “Clase de historia” (“History Class”) from Crónica (Chronicle) — bigotry by schoolmen against Hispanic youth. The school principal announces over the loudspeaker that he’s been hearing “demasiado español” (“too much Spanish”) from the students: “‘hablen en americano en estos recintos’” (“‘you people best speak American on the premises’”). One can’t miss, of course, the sly irony that, thanks to the poet’s own translation, the bigoted gringo speaks his bile in Spanish. What brings about healing, though, is not an apology from the principal or an attack by the poet, but an indication that subsequently the poet immersed himself in Spanish-language poetry, and to exemplify that he gives us quotations from Rubén Darío, Antonio Machado, Federico García Lorca, and Octavio Paz. Through one’s reading, then, as well as writing, language becomes both balm and guide. Villanueva’s own experience comes to illustrate a cultural shift as well:

En la clara actualidad: lo marginado
se ha movido más al centro;
lo de afuera se transforma en lo de adentro.

Horowitz’ translation here seems especially apt: “These days, there’s no denying: the marginalized / are going mainstream, / outsiders are becoming insiders.”

Villanueva’s steady emergence as one who synthesizes at least two cultural frames of reference shows a largeness of sensibility. His generosity of spirit suggests that he, from the beginning of his career, has been living beyond the pettiness of linguistic guerrilla warfare; and in her translation of this consistently meditative volume, Lisa Horowitz has approached her task judiciously. She and Villanueva both have a sharp sense of line.