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EDITORIAL: THE PARADIGM OF TRANSLATION

By Rainer Schulte

I recently reread Thomas Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* and contemplated on the intrinsic nature of how disciplines emerge, how they maintain their vitality, and how existing disciplines can be revitalized. It is no longer a hidden truth that much of contemporary criticism in literature and the humanities borders on being unreadable. A specialized language has taken over, a language that feeds on the combination of esoteric words that have lost a connection to clearly defined thought progressions and thereby builds syntactical and grammatical structures that are often void of content. It is unfortunate that many literature programs in the country not only promote this form of writing but also take a certain pride in being incomprehensible. A few years ago, an assistant professor, who had just received his Ph.D. and had been thoroughly trained in the modes of deconstructionism, told me that he could not talk to me because I had not yet learned his language. That encounter will stay with me for the rest of my life. I don’t need to elaborate my immediate reaction to his statement, only to mention that a long and intense conversation was triggered by his statement.

Kuhn develops the concept of “anomaly” as a driving force to create new directions of thinking and acting. Whenever established methodologies and techniques no longer are responding to the needs of a particular situation and problem, an anomaly comes into focus. When English departments were experiencing a loss of enrollment a few decades ago, and students were looking for greener pastures in other areas of the academic world, creative writing programs and departments saved the day. Whatever the ultimate goal of creative writing programs might be, it certainly cannot mean that every student who takes a creative writing course will end up as a writer. The rate of unemployment of writers would drastically increase. Curiously enough, the idea of building creative writing courses within a university is a particular academic trait of universities in the United States. It would be difficult to find universities in Europe that have programs in creative writing. Yet, that situation might also change in Europe in the next few years. The University of Leipzig has taken a first step to incorporate a degree program in creative writing within the larger context of literary studies.

I think that the paradigm of translation should become the new paradigm to revitalize the reading and interpretation of literary and humanistic texts in academia. Our most important goal as professors of literature should be to make students experience a text rather than looking at the text as an object that can be described with existing and often dried-out theoretical frames. Ultimately, all theoretical considerations should be derived from the practice of reading and interpretation rather than from preconceived abstract theoretical systems.

The reader who approaches the interpretation of literary and cultural texts from the point of view of “translation thinking” changes the basic question of “what does a text mean?” to “how does a text come to mean?” That attitude immediately indicates that there is more than one possible interpretation of a text and that there is no such thing as the “only” definitive interpretation or translation of a work. For any interpretation to be successful and meaningful, the reader should consider every text as a foreign text that needs to be discovered or perhaps uncovered, which will decrease the danger of readers unloading their preconceived baggage onto individual words in a text. Before any meaningful interpretation of a verbal text can be initiated, the reader must translate it into his or her own sensibility.

The advantage of looking at words from a translator’s perspective lies in the re-creation of
the visual environment of each word and how this environment undergoes an immediate change of associations as soon as the word is juxtaposed with another word. A multiplicity of associations works within the parameters of each word. By placing a word next to another word, the direction of meaning to be associated with that word within the context of the passage does become transparent. A recreation of the visual and sensuous situations behind words engages the reader to visualize the parameter of the word, which means that it no longer can be considered an object that needs to be described but rather a reality that opens a dialogue with the text. The translator’s attitude moves the reader from being a passive observer to being an active participant. The translator’s challenge is to transform the static appearance of a word on the page into the re-creation of a word’s internal movement. In musical terms, each note loses some of its possibilities of meaning when placed against the next note.

In addition, I suggest that translators as interpreters can also develop different techniques of walking through a text. I call this the horizontal reading. The translator chooses an image or expression in the first paragraph of a short story and then determines when and how that expression is repeated throughout the story. With each repetition, an additional meaning has been added by the writer, which enlarges the overall connotations and impact. A word on the first page gains an expansion of associations, which will help the reader and translator to obtain an expanded sense of the atmosphere of the work. That technique of reading through a text horizontally can be repeated on various levels, which allows the translator to reconstruct the complexity of the situations that have to be transplanted into a new language environment. To understand the basic concept of reading a text from a translator’s point of view, one could start with the translation of an essay by Francis Bacon into modern English. Such an exercise changes our perception of and approaches to the act of interpretation. The methodologies derived from the art and craft of translation will engage students and readers to experience the text by establishing an ongoing dialogue.
AN INTERVIEW WITH LUIS MURILLO FORT:
A TRANSLATOR’S TRANSLATOR IN BARCELONA

By Michael Scott Doyle

The interview with Luis Murillo Fort, aka Pedro Fontana, began on March 1, 2007, with an electronic plea for assistance to Peter Bush, a full-time literary translator living and working on his new translation of La Celestina in Barcelona. In essence, the request was the following:

I have been working on dialectal American literature (Mark Twain, William Faulkner, Robert Penn Warren, and Cormac McCarthy) that has been translated into Spanish, a fascinating topic that is now beginning to take on the shape of a book, dealing with issues such as the limits of translatability, transculturation, etc. I wanted to ask whether you might be so kind as to help me contact Luis Murillo Fort, who has translated several of Cormac McCarthy’s novels into Spanish. I have been trying to locate him by way of various Spanish publishing houses, the Casa del Traductor, Rainer Schulte at ALTA, and Edwin Gentzler, but so far no luck. I was wondering whether you might be able to put me in touch with him. I am hoping to do an interview with him about his work on McCarthy’s novels.

The e-mail was a somewhat desperate follow-up to a failed Internet search and repeated unsuccessful attempts to contact Murillo via several of his publishers. Of course, it was Dr. Edwin Gentzler who earlier that same day had suggested e-mailing Peter Bush. The next day, March 2, Bush sent the following response: “I looked Luis up in the telephone book and found him straightaway. He seems very pleasant, and astonished anyone should be interested in his translations.” Equipped now with contact information for Murillo, and grateful to M.M. Gentzler and Bush for their assistance, I now dispatched a formal request for an interview electronically to Mr. Luis Murillo Fort. Within the hour, “Luis” responded with the following:

I received this letter today, via Random House Mondadori, a couple of hours after talking about it on the phone with Peter Bush. I do appreciate your interest, which I really don’t deserve (…) You might like to know that I’m on The Road again right now, struggling with some impossible words and phrases by Cormac “The Man.” Perhaps you could provide some help with my queries? That would be great. Also, since you’re working with these translations, maybe you should know that Pedro Fontana (who is stated as translator for Suttree) is none other than myself.

With this introduction, the interview proper began on March 5, again via e-mail. Murillo was gracious in allowing the interviews to be conducted in English, the language he reads and translates from, but not the language that he habitually writes in:

When answering your questions, sometimes it takes me hours to complete a sentence. I’m fully aware of my muddy English! I may be a Beckett-short or -crisp for your Tolstoy, but even if I dig corresponding in English, it doesn’t help when trying to express a more developed idea. No grudges though. Let’s keep it in English!

Luis Murillo Fort is a translator’s translator who works full-time at his literary craft. Born in Barcelona in 1951, he is lean of build in his deep topsoil-brown leather jacket worn over a Carolina-blue shirt, unassuming, with a thin-lipped smile and piercing, inquisitive, greenish-gray brown eyes (“depending on the book I’m translating at the moment”) that twinkle with skepticism and traces of añejo Catalanian humor. He holds a degree in journalism and exudes the restlessness of an artist or intellectual. He learned English by “listening to
the Beatles, Dylan, and so on, checking their lyrics. Later I did some courses, three years in a row I think.”

Murillo became involved in literary translation when he “did some proof reading and found out there were plenty of bad translators around. One more would probably go unnoticed! Did my Save the Birds debut in 1989 (a thick volume about endangered birds which I co-translated with a young woman), and on I went…. ” If he has had any mentor on his way to becoming an accomplished literary translator, it is his “elder brother, Enrique, a great translator among other things,” who “was working at Anagrama around the late eighties, and he managed to get me in. Actually, my career is very closely linked to my brother’s comings and goings.” Luis Murillo “may translate as many as four books a year now, sometimes more than that.” Among the impressive range of novelists he has translated, from highbrow to popular, are Barry Gifford, Richard Russo, John LeCarré, Anne Rice, Jean Sasson, Nicholson Baker, Kelly Jones, Philip Pullman, James Carlos Blake, Mary Higgins Clark, Nicholas Evans, Danielle Steel, Richard Yates, Jonathan Franzen, Deborah Eisenberg, James Salter, and high-priest-among-American-novelists, Cormac McCarthy.

Having translated seven of McCarthy’s ten novels — including such widely acclaimed masterpieces as Suttree, Blood Meridian, and The Road, which garnered the 2007 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction — we may consider Murillo to be McCarthy’s translator into Spanish and as such benefit from what he has to say about translation and the trials and tribulations of translating the sui generis McCarthy. While the informal tone of Murillo’s English often betrays his abiding fondness for modern pop-rock-jazz-and-blues song writers (from the Beatles and Dylan to Tom Waits and Frank Zappa) and is imbued with a spirited playfulness, Murillo is an exceptional writer in Spanish, marvelously attentive to detail, with an uncanny ability to reproduce styles, voices, and registers and smuggle in the arcane where appropriate. Without the contributions of such accomplished translators, the global library of world literature would be sadly impoverished.

Michael Scott Doyle: How did you first come to read Cormac McCarthy? What was the first of his novels that you read and what impact did it have on you?

Luis Murillo Fort: I was entrusted with the translation of The Crossing by my brother Enrique, who was working for Plaza & Janés at the time. Only one other novel by McCarthy had been translated into Spanish (All the Pretty Horses), so Enrique was, in a way, the person who reintroduced him again in Spain. I hadn’t read anything by “The Man” yet, and the impact was, well, you can imagine! I really thought I wouldn’t survive. Still not sure if I did. Correctors put their hands, elbows, feet, and private parts in there, trying to domesticate the beast. And I guess the initial results were not very satisfactory. Later I made some changes to my translation, when Debate took over from Plaza, reprinted The Crossing, and published some more Cormacs. I’m still “in love” with The Crossing, as I am with Heartattack and Vine, my first Tom Waits album.

MSD: Do you know McCarthy personally or consult with him on your translation work?

LMF: I don’t. I sometimes send queries to his editor, Gary Fisketjon, who has been helpful and provides his own answers to my queries. Other times he sends my list to McCarthy, then e-mails me with a reply.

MSD: Have you visited East Tennessee and southwest Texas to experience first-hand the settings of McCarthy’s novels, to see and hear and feel the landscapes?

LMF: I wish I had. No, I have only visited New York about ten years ago. [As a follow-up to this response, the interviewer mailed Murillo a copy of Mike Smith’s insightful collection of hardscrabble images, You’re Not from Around
Here: Photographs of East Tennessee. Upon receiving this visual narrative of life in the “legendary hills” of “today’s Appalachian home” (Smith ii), Murillo e-mailed the following reaction (6/9/07): “My first thought after perusing the book is a complex one. I’ll try to explain. You know how it is, when you read novels you imagine the places and the characters, you mind-see them. And this is one of the best reasons for reading, isn’t it? You ‘create’ a world of your own from the world created by the author. And, think of it, this is what we translators do! So, looking at the pics is a sort of finding-out: Suddenly landscapes have real color, people have real wrinkles, beauty is actually beautiful, and ugliness is much more ugly than you could possibly have thought. The dream is broken. Welcome to reality! Impressive images, really. I can easily picture Cormac’s characters doing their thing down there, speaking their very succinct words. This is hard country.”

MSD: Do you consult or query others when translating McCarthy? Do you have a list of go-to people or particular resources you use?

LMF: I do, as you now know. And no, I don’t have a list. Dictionaries, the Net, friends at hand … and overseas. I do my own research and trust what you could call my “inspiration.” Translating The Crossing, I had to delve deeply into the Enciclopedia Espasa until I found words that were key to this story about the boy and the she-wolf.

MSD: How do you actually do your work as a translator?

LMF: I started translating with a manual typewriter (bulky metal thing, hard to work at but very loyal). I work with a computer now, and send my translations via e-mail, no paper. I do not use a tape recorder for dictation, but at one point I did think it could be useful. I receive the original text, read some chapters (never to the end of it), and proceed to do a test, which may or may not work, although it usually does, at least some of it. I’ve become familiar with McCarthy’s writing, so in a way every new book by him is, like, “OK, let’s see what the guy has to say now.” I’m not frightened anymore, even if I can be a bit shaky when first opening a new McCarthy. Whenever I work on one of his books, it seems like certain words or sentences keep hanging there, floating in my mind, and I might find a solution when riding on a bus or having lunch. In my most recent McCarthy translation, The Road, I let it rest for a while after my first correction. I do that when translating him. It gives me some detachment, which I badly need in order to see certain things more clearly.

MSD: What do you mean by proceed to do a test? What kind of test?

LMF: What I mean is, like a child with a somewhat challenging new toy, I have a go at it to see if I’ll be able to handle (and enjoy) it. In other words, translating pages 1 to, say, 3, let them rest, go for a walk or whatever, read them again, see if the impression I got with the first reading of Cormac’s text is more or less matched by my “own” words and sentences. I’m a translator by accident, but soon I found out I could enjoy this work. For several reasons, dealing with a good book has some love-making quality to it. And as with love-making (I never liked the Spanish version: “hacer el amor.” Talk about translation!), there can be some mild pain involved, too. And this is the case with McCarthy’s books.

MSD: How would you describe your “personality” as a translator? When faced with McCarthy, are you deferential and respectful, or more aggressive and creative, trying to match his art with your own capabilities in Spanish?

LMF: I guess I’m an intuitive translator of sorts, perhaps because of my being self-taught. I try to be very respectful with the text, which doesn’t prevent me from being adventurous. I felt kind of awestruck at first, overwhelmed by
the text itself. Then, as I grew to know McCarthy (his work) better, I felt more encouraged to be more “creative.”

**MSD:** What are your major responsibilities in translating McCarthy? Is there an operative moral dimension for you, i.e., fidelity or loyalty vs. betrayal, the old traduttore, traditore quandary?

**LMF:** My concerns are more or less the same as with any other author. The difference when translating McCarthy (and a few other authors) is that I’m fully aware of being before an extraordinary writer, which means that being alert and careful is paramount. My main purpose is to achieve something that “sounds” like Cormac McCarthy.

**MSD:** When you read McCarthy as a translator into Spanish, are you being particularly attentive to anything?

**LMF:** I’m not looking for anything in particular. I just try to listen with my ears wide open, give myself over to what is in the text… while I wonder how on earth will I translate this or that.

**MSD:** Is there a theory of translation, or a strategy and set of tactics, that underlie your work?

**LMF:** No strategies at all. I can only trust my intuition, and my knowledge of the Spanish language. I try to sort out things step by step, then go through my text many times.

**MSD:** What does this involve, this “going through the text many times”?

**LMF:** It involves reading my still-not-final text once again, re-checking the original text when some problem arises (an ill-constructed sentence, a too-obscure meaning, an awkward solution to a non-problematic phrase), checking punctuation for the sake of Spanish readers. Finally, I might do a random test, opening the Word document, clicking on no particular page. I read it all over again, make some minor (or major) change or no change at all. Another page, another reading, out of context, just for the potential pleasure of it.

**MSD:** A novel such as Blood Meridian seems to wedge itself mulishly between Schleiermacher’s options — refusing stubbornly to be budged away from itself toward the new cultural readership while also resisting being approached by the “foreign” reader. Do you have a sense of either moving McCarthy toward your readers in Spanish (making him more accessible to them) or moving them toward the McCarthy you know in his own English, or both?

**LMF:** I never try, consciously, to make it (him) easy for the sake of Spanish readers. You only have to read one page in English to be aware that this is special stuff, so I want it to be special, too, in Spanish. Basically I have one reader in mind — myself. I believe this is the best or the only way to do it. You can speak of “readers,” but you’ll agree with me in that every reader is unique. A word like “candilejo,” which I used for “slutlamp” will be read with greater or lesser eyebrow lifting, depending on the particular reader’s background. “Candilejo” is not a common word. “Slutlamp” isn’t, either. By the way, it’s amazing how a novel that oozes squalor and blood can also conjure up such tremendous beauty.

**MSD:** Are there particular elements you try to capture or prioritize in your translation? The voice, the feel, the style, the mood, the semantic richness and allusiveness…

**LMF:** Unfortunately, my translations lack some of the richness of the original text. There’s no way I can translate the dialectal nuances you find in McCarthy’s works. I simply try to do my best. The Spanish language is very rich, as you well know, but it doesn’t allow for cutting words here and there, only if
you’re trying to mimic street jargon. Otherwise it could end up sounding like Andalusian stuff. Which might work for Andalusian readers (I don’t think so) but not for the rest.

MSD: Your procedure has been to translate the substandard dialect of McCarthy’s characters into a conventional Spanish, rather than “relocate” or contrive a dialect-diction-register in Spanish. Did you consider “finding” or “creating” a suitable replacement in Spanish?

LMF: I’m not a translation hero. Translating McCarthy can be — is — a very rewarding job (and a full-blown torture, too, if full-blown applies to torture), and that’s the main reason I want to do it every time. Not in terms of money. I was paid a little better for the last one, but it’s always the same: phone calls asking/begging for increased royalties and page rate, people looking down on you, calling or accusing you of being a privileged one… What this means is that you can’t even begin to consider creating an entire new way of using language because you need to type a fair number of pages a week “to make ends meet.” (I first heard this line in “Lady Madonna” by the Beatles.) I wish I could find a way to reflect part of McCarthy’s dialectal nuances in my translations, and I did give it some thought. But I’m not a genius, just a translator with some “sense,” and not necessarily a “common” sense. I had this kind of empathy with Barry Gifford. Apparently, his dialogues kept their wise, juicy quality in the Spanish version. Regarding McCarthy, initially I found myself overwhelmed by the task. I was aware that many things sounded sort of diminished in my translation, that they lost their unique quality, their dialectal uniqueness. But then again, Tennessee is not Almería, El Paso is not Mérida. And “unique” means you cannot transfer it to a different environment, right? Fortunately, The Road was not as challenging in this respect.

MSD: McCarthy often coins new words in English. This must be quite challenging to translate.

LMF: English is such a synthetic language, much easier to coin new words in than Spanish. I did try to match the “weirdness” when it slapped me in the face. However, I didn’t succeed most of the time. The very second paragraph of Suttree begins with: “Old stone walls unplumbed by weathers…” Here you have it. This use of “unplumbed” — not to mention “weathers” — is not an orthodox one. So I decided to throw caution to the wind and be a bit bolder than in previous translations. My version goes: “Viejos muros de piedra que la intemperie no ha desaplomado….” Yes, I know, maybe too long. But then we Spaniards are used to longer sentences. “Desaplomado” is an (old?) way of saying “desplomado.” But “desplomar,” for the average reader, is more like “crumble.” So, in a way, I was matching the original. Or so I thought.

Next came the corrector [proofreader]. I was lucky enough (after being deemed as “weird” and “demanding” myself by Mondadori) to have the proofs sent to me. The corrector didn’t like “desaplomado” and changed it for a more conventional word. I decided to stick by my guns. The thing is, I didn’t have the chance to have a look at the final text after I translated it, and I really don’t know about the changes made to my version.

In my most recent work on The Road, the corrector changed, perhaps wisely so, my “de anochecida” for “al anochecer” (original text “at evening”). Now I may be wrong, my English is not that good, but “at evening” sounds kind of old fashioned or maybe “local” to me. “De anochecida” seemed to have the right amount of weirdness here. Or the word “rimstone pool.” I looked this up and found that there was only one equivalent, unfortunately a French word but widely used by speleologists and geologists. So “gour” it went. But the corrector jumped up from his chair at the sight of it, suggesting “socavón” or “deslizamiento.” And, of course, the reader
should jump a little bit, too, because “gour” is jargon in its own way. So, in a way, I was introducing a strange word but not betraying the original. (And, after all, there is no other word in Spanish for that rimstone pool/dam).

You probably have noticed the use of “I reckon” instead of “I guess” or “I think” in McCarthy’s novels. This was one of the first language nuances I found myself unable to translate properly. Then came dozens and dozens more...

**MSD:** In Suttree, McCarthy sums up what any reader of his fiction might feel upon reading one of his novels: “The words of the book swam off the page eerily and he thought he’d never read a stranger tale” (294). Can this kind of literary world be taken into another language and culture?

**LMF:** What a great book! I went to quite a lot of trouble during, and after, its translation. I was originally commissioned for it by Debate, then finished translating it for Mondadori. In the meantime, Debate refused, against what was already agreed upon, to pay me partially. And I had to re-mend what the “corrector” at Mondadori did with my translation. I checked with Gary Fisketjon about the convenience of adding a glossary at the end of the book for some of the characters’ names. Mondadori didn’t like that, and I finally had to include more footnotes than I wanted. This is why I signed this translation as Pedro Fontana. Yes, I think “it” [taking McCarthy’s literary worlds into a foreign language] can be done, as long as you accept that translation implies some shifting from the original text.

**MSD:** Do you take the time to learn their precise meanings before you translate words such as “anchorite” and “parallax” [Blood Meridian]? Is this lexical knowledge a requirement for the translator?

**LMF:** Fortunately I do know the meaning of the word “anacoreta” (which I gather is not as weird in Spanish as “anchorite” is in English), if only because I’m on my way of becoming one! I didn’t know back then about “paralaje,” though. The BIG question for me is, okay, you found the equivalent for a word or phrase. Now, does it have the same cultural, semantic weight as the original word or phrase has or is intended to have? I don’t think it’s possible to find universal solutions, because one writer is different from another and will use one particular word with a particular purpose, even an unconscious one. To “ease” things a little bit, each particular translator has his or her own familiar and academic background, his or her own tastes. For example: to avoid repetition of the word “bed” in the original English text, Translator No. 1 will choose “lecho” instead of “cama.” Translator No. 2 will discard “lecho” for being too dramatic in the context. Translator No. 3 will grossly type “catre” and actually celebrate it with another cold beer. Translator No. 4 won’t even notice the annoying repetition of “bed.” And so on...

**MSD:** McCarthy’s novels disturb the status quo of convention in the source language, and one might consider that the translation poetics at work should also be one of willful disturbance and destabilization, that the translation should do to the target language what the original author did to the source language. A performative poetics characterized by its disturbing impact on the familiar...

**LMF:** You’re damn right. Disturbance is the key word, or as Frank Zappa would have put it: “The secret word for tonight is: Disturbance.” (Okay, he might have used Mas-turbance instead!) I couldn’t have expressed it any better. The part about doing to the target language what the author does to the source language is, in a nutshell, exactly what I’m trying to do.

**MSD:** What do you think McCarthy loses in translation?

**LMF:** A lot, it’s more than a whole world apart. Every new McCarthy book is a challenge
for me, as a translator, and as a reader, too. It brings fresh air, albeit full of ash\textsuperscript{13} or whatever, taking me away to a world I’m kind of familiar with.

**MSD:** In your search for “equivalents,” how do you try to compensate for the losses?

**LMF:** I wouldn’t talk about “equivalents.” Many things get lost when translating him (at least if it’s me who does the job), yet I think there’s probably nothing you can do about it. It’s the price you have to pay for not reading the book as it was written. But remember, Spain is also a melting pot of different cultures.

Normally, as you know, what takes three lines in English may take four in Spanish. And what if the author doesn’t give a damn about what a comma is supposed to do! You find yourself inventing something that doesn’t break the original rhythm yet keeps the Spanish reader from being choked for lack of breath! One of the things I like about translating McCarthy is that it allows (forces) me to use Spanish words that modern times and standardization have consigned to oblivion. (Thanks, Cormac!) So, in a way, I’m making up a little bit for lost stuff.

**MSD:** Translating McCarthy’s idio-socio-dialect raises age-old issues of what and how, content and form, message and manner, sender and receiver. What has translating him taught you about the nature, limits, and possibilities of translation?

**LMF:** Tell you what: the key word here is not dialect, but Dialectics (the old Marxist sense). Content and form are part of each other. More so with the great writers of all times. Bernhard, for the Spanish reader, is what his translator made of him, for better or worse. The same with McCarthy. I can only hope not to have spoiled some amazing books.

**MSD:** What do you consider to be your successes with him? What has been the most fun?

**LMF:** Success? I really don’t know. Surely I’m doing better work now than I did with *The Crossing*. I had fun with all of them, and suffered a lot, too. But I especially enjoyed translating *Blood Meridian* and *Suttree*, with *Outer Dark* and *The Road* as close seconds.

**MSD:** When you translate, do you ever imagine that you are the original author, but now writing the novel in Spanish? Or are you always aware that you are distinctly Luis Murillo doing a translation of what somebody else has written?

**LMF:** I reckon I’m mostly aware of my being that “Murillo” you mention. The only thing I do as a way of trying to be one with the author is, paradoxically, not to read the whole book previous to starting the translation, sometimes only a couple of chapters. Then the book and I go along, in a way, at a similar pace.

**MSD:** Is there a particular translator’s mindset at work?

**LMF:** I can’t say I have a “translator’s mindset.” In the case of McCarthy, being commissioned (or requesting) to translate one of his novels means that I will spend any number of weeks enjoying my work, and that this enjoyment will no doubt be joined by plenty of “Oh my god! Someone put me out of this misery!”

**MSD:** Ortega\textsuperscript{14} has written about the “good” utopian in translation, the translator who knows how exceedingly difficult it is to do well, and who knows that ultimately it is an impossible task. Nonetheless, the translator proceeds — “translation is dead, long live translation!”

**LMF:** You’re right. And your friend Ortega was, too. But dead or alive, translators must earn their living.

**MSD:** Critical acclaim has canonized McCarthy in his own lifetime. For example, the distinguished literary critic Harold Bloom...
Translation Review

(Yale University) writes in The New York Observer that “Blood Meridian… seems clearly to me the major esthetic achievement of any living American writer.” Alan Cheuse writes…

LMF: I did read all this praise you mention. They’re probably right. By the way, Faulkner has received some very bad translations here, which added to the complexity of his writing. Let’s hope no one can ever accuse me of that with McCarthy’s books.

MSD: In Spain, the prestigious literary and cultural arbiter, El País, has recognized McCarthy as “sinónimo de grandeza literaria” [synonymous with great literature]. Do you think he has influenced writers in Spanish, e.g., as García Márquez has influenced writers in English? (By extension, I am interested in your view as a translator, or that of the Spanish literary critics, of the place of renowned American dialectal novelists — Twain, Faulkner, Warren, McCarthy — in Spanish. How have they, with their translators, shaped the Spanish literary landscape?)

LMF: I don’t think those writers have had a huge effect on current Spanish fiction. Yet Delibes, Benet, and a few others did benefit from them, no doubt.

You know how it feels with these kinds of writers and books. You could change, and correct, and change again, and re-correct ad infinitum. That’s the bad news (especially for our bank accounts). The good news is that Literature requires much mending and polishing and correcting. We translators contribute to literature in that we match the author’s efforts when changing and correcting and mending and polishing.

MSD: What have reviewers said of your translations of McCarthy?

LMF: I don’t keep track of that, sorry. In any case, Spanish reviewers rarely mention translators. I remember someone saying I had properly “defended” McCarthy’s prose…. Reviewers in Spain don’t comment about the work of translators. We do NOT exist.

MSD: How would you describe the status of literary translation and the literary translator in Spain today?

LMF: We are the Cinderellas of this whole crazy publishing business. Period. Only recently have some publishers started to include the translator’s name (quite shyly so, but then I wouldn’t go for BIG capital letters, either) on the book covers, front or back.

The average rate per page is 10 euros [about $14/page or five cents/word, 7/18/07 exchange rate]. But you can find people working for 7 euros [about four cents/word]! Certain translators may be paid 12–13 euros per page. Some publishers even phone around until they find someone who is willing to translate for a very low rate (a student, a newly minted graduate, a desperate translator). There are publishers, though, like Anagrama in Barcelona or Alfaguara in Madrid, who are paying what you could consider more than reasonable rates.

The trick to counting the pages translated using Word (or a similar tool), means that you’re not actually being paid per page (regardless of the number of characters with spaces typed) but per full page (1800 to 2100 characters). In other words, Proust-like pages!

On the other hand, while some European countries treat their translators well, they don’t have a royalties option like we do. If a book sells very, very well, its translator may receive a check in terms of having a copyright to the work. But the percentages are really low (0.5–1%), so we’re talking mega-best-sellers here. And not every publisher informs you about its sales.

You occasionally read a complimentary remark about a particular translator, but we are normally consigned to oblivion. I’m sure we would have better translations if more reviewers bothered to really read the books
they’re writing about, which would then equip them to talk about their translators.

I read about this poor translator some time ago, who was massacred by two different journals/reviewers, highlighting the same paragraph of the book! Okay, it was horribly translated. But then, where were the “correctors”? Was the translation sent to press without even a glance?

**MSD:** *What “best-practices” advice would you give a beginner or student who aspires to becoming a literary translator?*

**LMF:** I’m really not into advice, but here are a few observations. My brother Enrique told me once, when I was doing a “test” before my first translation, “Try to catch the verb first.” Meaning you had to find the right word in Spanish for the main verb in the original sentence. Everything else would then revolve around it. (He didn’t say that in many cases the “right” word may vary from one translator to another. And this is what translation is all about, isn’t it?)

I’ve noticed that many colleagues don’t care about ugly-sounding sentences if they believe they “nail it” as far as meaning is concerned. I won’t fight them, but my ears ache some when I read them. Let’s not forget: we’re dealing with the translator’s voice. It’s like he’s reciting someone else’s verses. The poem is there for all who care, but surely it would sound somewhat or very different if recited by another person. You can read a sonnet stopping at every line end, or you can read it regardless of the metrics. And we’re hearing the words when we read a book, aren’t we. So, if you find, once you have it in your own language, that a phrase or sentence is ill-sounding even when you built it perfectly around its meaning, use those tricks you learned at school. A small variation, a subtle shifting may help. Very important: when the author builds a sentence, he or she wants it to mean this and not that, but also to have a particular length, and a particular sound. Of course, we’re talking about authors who deserve a good translation. As a professional, you must respect yourself and always try to do things the best you can.

I think it was Javier Marías who wrote that the translated text must have some “echo” of the original text. I wonder what the case is with translations into American English, but the works of Thomas Bernhard, in their Spanish version, have a weirdness in them that cannot be explained unless you know these texts were written in German by a very fine and complex Holland-born, Austria-grown writer. His Spanish translator is really good, but you know what? Every time I read a book by Bernhard, I’m aware I’m reading his translator because it is so evident that he had to re-create everything to make it Spanish-readable. His presence [the translator’s visibility] can be a little overwhelming. I’d rather avoid that.

**Notes**

1. Peter Bush, past Vice-President of the International Federation of Translators (FIT), is a well known literary and cultural translator whose works include, among others, Juan Goytisolo’s autobiography, Forbidden Territory and Realms of Strife, the narratives, Quarantine and The Marx Family Saga which was awarded the Instituto Cervantes, American Literary Translators Association, and Valle-Inclán Prize for Literary Translation. He has also translated the work of Pedro Almodóvar, Carmen Boullosa, Juan Carlos Onetti and Senel Paz. He edited The Voice of the Turtle, an anthology of Cuban Stories. The American Literary Translators Association gave his translation of Luis Sepúlveda’s The Old Man Who Read Love Stories a Best Translation Award for 1995.

2. The Casa del Traductor - Centro Hispánico de Traducción Literaria, located in Tarazona, Spain is part of RECI, the Red Europea de Centros de Traducción Literaria (www.casadeltraductor.com/ and http://www.grinzane.net/P_Traductor_SPA.html). It is “a public institution dedicated to the
development of literary translation.” Specifically, this Spanish Centre for Literary was created “to play a part in making translation projects capable of excelling for their literary value, their original character or to contribute to the diffusion of the culture” (www.grinzane.net/P_Traductor_ENG.html and http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.php-URL_ID=4202&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html).

3 Dr. Edwin Gentzler “is the Director of the Translation Center and Professor of Translation Studies at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. He is the author of Contemporary Translation Theories (London: Routledge, 1993), which has been reissued in a 2nd revised edition (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 2001) and has been translated into Italian, Bulgarian, and Persian. He is also the co-editor (with Maria Tymoczko) of the anthology Translation and Power (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002). He serves as co-editor (with Susan Bassnett) of the Topics in Translation Series for Multilingual Matters (UK).” (http://people.umass.edu/gentzler/)

4 Internet searches in English and Spanish yielded only the titles of Murillo’s many translations into Spanish but neither Doyle nor his graduate students (who were invited to join the “search” for Murillo) were able to find online contact information. Murillo does not maintain a Web Page.

5 A major publisher.
6 A major Spanish publisher.
7 “The Pulitzer Prizes for journalism, literature, music and drama were established by the 1904 will of Joseph Pulitzer, a 19th century journalist. Administered by the Columbia School of Journalism, the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction is awarded “for distinguished fiction by an American author, preferably dealing with American life.” Each winner receives a gold medal as well as a cash award of $10,000 (raised in 2003 from $7500). Many Pulitzer Prize Winners go on to receive other literary awards such as the Nobel Prize in Literature” (The Nobel Prize Internet Archive, http://almaz.com/pulitzer/).

8 A major Spanish publisher.
9 A major Spanish publisher.

11 In response to this observation about “succinct words,” so that Murillo could hear examples of the actual dialects and dictions, the interviewer secured permission from linguist Michael Montgomery (author with Joseph S. Hall of the monumental Dictionary of Smoky Mountain English, Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2004) to make and send Murillo cassette copies of recordings of Appalachian speakers from the vicinity of Cobb County, East Tennessee, and Haywood County, just over the line in western North Carolina. The recordings are: “J. Lacy Barnes,” 7/12/59 (Tape 35, Acc. 422) and “Bob Francis Interview: Mountain Stories,” 7/24/56 (Tape 43, Acc. 422), both from the Joseph Hall Papers collection in the Archives of Appalachia, East Tennessee State University (ETSU). Copies were facilitated by Ned Irwin, University Archivist. The Archives of Appalachia, a unit of the Center for Appalachian Studies and Services at ETSU, are an invaluable resource that “collects, safeguards, and shares the publication, papers, images, and sounds that document life in Appalachia.”

12 Interviewer’s note: The word “desaplomado” was indeed retained in the published translation of Suttree (p. 9).

13 “Ash” is a reference to the grim, cold, ash-covered, post-apocalyptic setting of The Road.

Alan Cheuse writes in *USA Today* that McCarthy is “without parallel in American writing today.” Ralph Ellison says that “McCarthy is a writer to be read, to be admired, and quite honestly — envied.” Michael Dirda writes in *The Washington Post Book World* that “Like the novelists he admires — Melville, Dostoyevsky, Faulkner — Cormac McCarthy has created an imaginative œuvre greater and deeper than any single book. Such writers wrestle with the gods themselves.” And Malcolm Jones has written in *Newsweek* that “With each book he expands the territory of American fiction.”

15 Major Spanish novelists during the Franco and immediate post-war period in Spain.
16 A major Spanish publisher.
17 A well known Spanish novelist, translator and columnist.
THE TITLES OF YAŞAR KEMAL’S WIND FROM THE PLAIN TRILOGY

By Barry Tharaud

Yaşar Kemal’s Wind from the Plain trilogy first appeared in stages: the first volume, The Wind from the Plain [Ortadirek] was published in Turkish in 1960, and the following two volumes, Iron Earth, Copper Sky [Yer Demir Gök Bakır] and The Undying Grass [Ölmez Otu], were published in 1963 and 1968, with Thilda Kemal’s English translations appearing in 1963, 1974, and 1977. The English titles of volumes 2 and 3 are clear enough. In Iron Earth, Copper Sky, the Turkish word gök, like the English word sky, can carry the metaphorical connotation of “heaven,” thereby suggesting an opposition between heaven and earth and between material and spiritual worlds, which is an important theme of volumes 2 and 3. In addition to being beautifully impressionistic and even modernistic, the title has an epigrammatic quality as well, which suggests that the heavens are as unyielding and intractable as the earth for the poor peasants of Yalak village, so that they can’t escape the harsh existential conditions of their lives but are in effect “caught between a rock and a hard place.” Moreover, the title is also one of those hypnotic phrases, sprinkled throughout Kemal’s works, that arise spontaneously on the tongue of a character and take on a life of their own, sometimes as the beginning of a traditional lament, and that capture a powerful feeling of hope or despair, love or hatred, and gives form and expression to such feelings. The phrase “iron earth, copper sky” emerges out of Taşbaş’ despair in the “argument” or summary at the head of Chapter 32 in The Undying Grass:

[…] Caught in a mesh of black thoughts, he can find no issue to his plight, no way of piercing the four dark stifling walls that are closing in on him. Earth of iron, sky of copper, he keeps repeating to himself. The phrase sticks to his tongue. Sky of copper … Of copper … Earth and sky afford no hope for him any longer. […] (3.225) [3.255] The title of volume 3, The Undying Grass, is wonderfully evocative as well, as it is used to describe the old woman, Meryemce: “You can break her and burn her, you can hack her to pieces, she’ll manage to keep alive. She’s like the undying grass” (3.112) [3.138]. The titles of volumes 2 and 3 are used to describe humanity and the human condition from an existential point of view. However, the poetic and evocative English title of volume 1, which is also the title of the entire trilogy in English, bears no resemblance to the original Turkish titles. Since the Turkish titles are significant, it is appropriate to begin our examination of Kemal’s first trilogy with an explanation of the Turkish titles of the trilogy as a whole, and of volume 1.

The Turkish title of the trilogy is Dağın Öte Yüzü, or literally in English “the mountain’s [dağın] other side [öte] face [yüzü],” or loosely, “the appearance of things on the other side of the mountain,” with perhaps also a connotation of “how ‘the other half’ lives.” To the desperately poor peasants of the steppe north of the Toros Mountains, the rich Çukurova plain south of the Toros appears to be a land of opportunity: every fall the peasants travel over the Toros to pick cotton in the Çukurova so they can pay off their debts and buy supplies to survive the harsh winters on the steppe. From an economic perspective, “the other side of the mountain” implies the hidden economy of impoverished peasants whose oppression and exploitation is a foundation of the fabulous wealth of the Çukurova cotton industry, which benefits primarily a handful of wealthy landowners. This perspective is raised in the epigraph to volume 1 — which has the effect of an epigraph for the entire trilogy,
since it is the only volume that has an epigraph:
Yürü bre fıkaralık elinden
Dolanıp belime kuşak olmuştur
(Gündeşlioğlu)

[Hey! Keep your hands to yourself,
Poverty, and pass on by;
Don’t wrap yourself around my
waist as if you were my belt.]³

The epigraph clearly announces the economic themes that are central to the trilogy, including poverty and the political and spiritual manipulation that sometimes accompany it. Kemal is a socialist, and taking his novels and memoirs and reportage all together, it’s clear that he has an abiding interest in the psychological exploration of the savagery and greed of the rich ağas of the Çukurova, who transform traditional society into a modern capitalist system that exploits labor, destroys nature, and turns everything into a commodity. We will briefly examine such concerns when we explore volume 1 in detail. For now, however, as important as the psychology of economic exploitation may be for us and for Kemal, his artistic interests lie far beyond the sort of literary art produced by the Soviet realists⁴: from a broader, existential perspective, the differences between the poverty of the steppe and the wealth of the Çukurova are local and partial, and therefore are often illusory or merely symbolic. Such illusory differences are reflected by the basic geography as well: if winter on the steppe is bitter and the Yalak villages are faced with starvation before the end of winter each year (2.213–14) [2.374], early autumn in the Çukurova is an inferno in which mosquitoes and malaria abound and the drinking water is as warm as blood. If life on the steppe is harsh, it is a place of family and community and tradition, while the Çukurova is not to be trusted. It is a plain, flat, immense, boundless, with swamps and bogs and rivers and beyond it the wide sea. It is an endless whiteness, where tall whirling dust-devils prowl the land like huge motley giants reaching to the sky…. It is a creature out of this world, mute, yet its voice is raised in a long cry, it has hands of soft cotton, hair of silk, panama hats, white garments, dark eyes. The Çukurova’s not to be trusted. [It is] A green dragon that comes hissing out of the skies. The villagers from up the Toros Mountains are never at ease in the land of [the] Çukurova.

(3.29–30) [3.36–37]

And while Yalak village may be home, there are times when it is as mysterious and forbidding as the Çukurova. It is on the edge of “the howling whirling red-thistled wolf-haunted steppe” (3.24) [3.29], where the idiot Spellbound Ahmet wanders and has contact with the legendary Peri King (3.191 ff.) [3.221], where Taşbaş’ [Taşbaşoğlu’s] forebears assume legendary proportions (2.9 ff.) [2.11 ff.], and the child Hasan’s “sacred rock” becomes the catalyst for the villagers to create in their imaginations a Golden Gate or entry to paradise (2.69–70) [2.155]. Hence, although the steppe may at times appear to be a symbol of daily life, whereas the Çukurova plain is a symbol of hopes and dreams, life and character are the same in all places — only the symbols are superficially different, so that all things have their compensations. Long Ali may momentarily think that the wealthy and independent Blunt Osman, whom he meets on the road, might be of assistance to him (1.97–99) [1.124–25] in his desperate trip to the Çukurova with his mother on his back, but Osman’s good fortune comes at a cost, in the loss of social ties, even as the best cotton comes with the worst heat and mosquitoes:

“I’ve been picking cotton in this accursed Çukurova for fifteen years […] and I’ve never known such a heat nor seen so many mosquitoes.”

[…] “We’ve never seen such wonderful cotton either, Anakiz sister,” [Memidik] murmured. “The hotter the weather, the better the cotton crop. Just look at these bolls,
The illusory duality of the steppe and the Çukurova is at times expressed directly, as when a cotton field is like a snowy steppe and as the brightness of the snow blanches the night, so the white-blooming cotton field lit up the darkness. (3.77–78) [3.90–91]

Even the Toros Mountains, which separate the steppe and the plain, at times seem to hardly exist and are far less real than the fantastic imaginings of the villagers. One can imagine the steppe and the plain merging:

Far to the north, the mountains of the Toros hovered barely visible, drowned in the heat-haze like a light film of ashes, like a flimsy ephemeral cloud that would vanish in an instant. (3.109) [3.135]

Thus Kemal portrays an illusory dualism that disguises the sameness and consistency of existence. As Emerson once remarked, riches and poverty are a thick or thin costume; and our life — the life of all of us — identical. For we transcend the circumstance continually, and taste the real quality of existence; as in our employments, which only differ in the manipulations, but express the same laws; or in our thoughts, which wear no silks, and taste no ice-creams. Moreover, even as Kemal mentions in his memoirs that the plain was eroded from the Toros Mountains, so is the steppe eroded from the Toros, so that geologic fact is a symbol of moral truth: life on the steppe and life on the plain are ultimately fashioned from the same “substance,” which is ultimately the human imagination. The idea that human existence transcends the local material conditions of life is apparent throughout the trilogy, and therefore the original title is appropriate — although less poetic than “the wind from the plain.” The original Turkish title invites a recognition of an illusory dualism based on the contrast between the steppe and the Çukurova, as well as more local contrasts, since Yalak village lies on the borderland between the steppe and the forests of the foothills of the Toros where the children play and gather wood — between nature as a bleak monotony occasionally punctuated by a subtle and startling beauty, and nature as an obstacle from which come struggle and sustenance. Both the major and the minor dualism, between places and conditions both farther afield and near at hand, are transcended by the human spirit and the human imagination. The novel is not primarily, as James Baldwin would have it on the back cover of the English translation of The Undying Grass, a social protest that “speaks for those people for whom no one else is speaking.”

The significance of the Turkish title of the trilogy as a whole is extended in the title of volume 1. On the most basic literal level, ortadirek is the main support pole in a nomad tent (direk = column, pillar, mast, flagstaff; orta = middle, center, central, i.e., main). Nomadism is an important theme either directly or indirectly in Kemal’s Çukurova novels. For example, in the Memed novels, the Yörük nomad Kerimoğlu is a symbol of pre-capitalist conditions, since he lives a kind of primitivist, edenic existence in which there is no exploitation. When Memed enters Kerimoğlu’s tent, which has seven poles and is like “paradise” in its riot of embroidered images that echo the forms and colors of nature, he notices that “The tent pole was carved with a pattern representing deer in flight, worked in mother-of-pearl” (148) [175]. “Ortadirek” also has a more general, figurative meaning of “support,” so that it takes on the meaning of “mainstay” or something that sustains. From a modern capitalist perspective, we’re likely to think of job or profession, or a breadwinner or provider, which in the context of the novel directs our focus to Long Ali [Uzun Ali], who is the head of the family whose journey from the steppe to the Çukurova is described in the novel. However, Long Ali is secondary to his mother Meryemce and her
antagonist Old Halil, so that we are forced to look yet deeper for the significance of the title, to the spirit that “supports,” upholds, or sustains human beings, and that finds its outlet in thought or action, directed by the creative imagination. In Homeric Ionia, this force was known as μὴνος [menos], which includes rage and aggression; in nineteenth-century France, this “life force” used to be known as élan vital; and in late nineteenth-century Germany, Nietzsche conceives of this force in exceptional individuals as a specially acculturated “power,” which he describes in his notebooks from the 1880s that were collected and posthumously published by his sister as The Will to Power [Der Wille zur Macht]. By focusing on two elderly protagonists, Kemal gives us a very broad and long-range perspective of the force that sustains human existence — not just physically, but psychologically, spiritually, and imaginatively as well. In the context of the Ortadirek volume of Kemal’s trilogy, “the other side of the mountain” is old age and the decline toward death and disintegration as the life force wanes. By focusing mainly on elderly characters in this first volume of the trilogy, Kemal’s examination of the life force takes on an urgency as well as a more obvious universal perspective, because old age waits for all of us unless we are cut off prematurely.

Finally, from yet another perspective, the title Ortadirek can mean “mainmast,” which suggests the image of a ship at sea. Yalak village lies at the edge of “the ocean-like steppe” (2.154) [2.288], and the sea has a salty tang that [is] like the smell of the steppe” (3.24) [3.29]. Although the “iron earth” sometimes seems as unyielding as Old Halil, who is “hard as the old earth” (3.15) [3.18], or as Meryemce, who is “like the undying grass” (3.112) [3.138], Kemal at times portrays the earth as fluid and interchangeable with the sea and sky. Since nature is fluid like the human imagination through which it is perceived, the sea is an appropriate metaphor for all of nature and for life itself. Long Ali describes the “vast sea, that turns to purple, to orange, constantly changing into various colors, mighty, unfathomable, having no beginning and no end” (1.124) [1.155]. Like the sea, the Çukurova is constantly changing and undergoing metamorphosis: in the mist and haze “The encircling mountains … vanished, as though spirited away by some powerful, magic hand, and the plain stretched flat into the Anatolian steppe beyond the Toros range” (3.170–71) [3.199–200]. This constant metamorphosis, which is periodically described throughout the trilogy, embodies the common existential concern with life as a process — apart from whatever destinations or ends the human imagination may give it.

In Ortadirek, the symbolic metamorphosis of the Çukurova becomes literal when it is flooded with water during Long Ali’s childhood when he is surrounded by water and is rescued by Old Halil (1.35) [1.43], and shortly afterward Cingilolu’s poplar forest is swept into the sea (1.125) [1.156]. The same symbolic metamorphosis occurs in volume 3, The Undying Grass, when “the plain was like a great sea” (3.177) [3.206] during the flood that carries away the corpse of Şevket Bey, and Memidik searches for the body all the way to the Mediterranean Sea. It is at this time that a further metamorphosis occurs as the material and spiritual worlds merge and Memidik sees a vision of Taşbaşoğlu, with seven balls of light in his wake, “treading over the bright waters of the flooded plain” (3.178) [3.207]. The fluid human imagination commonly finds its counterpart in the fluid world of nature in which the “grey undulating steppe,” itself patterned after the sea, is projected onto the more fluid element of the air, where “Wave after wave of screeching birds went sweeping by over [Long Ali’s] head. Red thistles streamed through the air like the birds, wave after wave” (3.24) [3.29]. In both Memidik’s supernatural vision of Taşbaş and Long Ali’s natural vision of the waves of birds over the undulating steppe, the perception of the fluidity and the beauty of all things is accompanied by a state of anguish: Memidik awakes and feels “that unbearable heavy emptiness still in his heart” (3.178) [3.207], while Long Ali feels “A
sharp pain [stab] knife-like at his body” (3.24) [3.29]. If human beings and the world of nature are fluid and correspond with each other, and if both are the product of human perception, how can we be sure that what we see is not illusion? How can we find value in human life? And how can we live with the anguish that arises from our deepest feelings and insights? Kemal addresses these questions throughout the thousand pages of his trilogy.

To conclude our examination of the ship metaphor that is implied by the title amid the fluidity of nature and imagination, Ortadirek can also be a nautical metonymy that carries connotations of the complex relations between nature and culture. Even as the name of Değirmenoluk village in Memed, My Hawk implies the human capacity to harness the forces of both nature and human nature for productive cultural purposes, so does the concept of “mainmast” in Ortadirek. In Memed, My Hawk, the water that turns Earless İsmail’s mill, from which the village takes its name, comes from the peaks of Akçadağ and runs underground to emerge at the huge plane tree just outside the village. The waters are part of the force and substance of nature, which is channeled through the mill race [“oluk”] to turn the mill [“değirmen”], so that the village name is a symbol of the relationship between nature and culture at its most basic and materialistic level, as the stream is channeled and harnessed in the practical service of human culture. In addition to the relationship between nature and culture in the macrocosm of nature, it also holds true in the microcosm of man, where human drives such as aggression and sex are “channeled” through the forms and institutions of culture, which enable individual human expression. In the case of “mainmast,” the title suggests how the wind-forces of nature are harnessed to drive ships, whether it be literal winds and literal ships on the sea, or the figurative force of human desire that drives human beings across the sea-like steppe and over the Toros Mountains to the Çukurova plain. This metaphorical force of human desire is nicely captured in the title in English translation, The Wind from the Plain, although it doesn’t of course capture the interplay of natural and cultural background implied by the Turkish Ortadirek, with its allusion to the tent pole of traditional nomadism and the structuralist interplay between both natural and human forces and their material expression in the realm of culture. Human drives, which mirror the force of nature, are subject to the control of the human will and subsequently imply existential choice, the creation of moral values, and the conflict between the individual and society. The novel Ortadirek is about the force of will that drives and the desire that directs humans in their “course” through life. Although a young man or woman may have a course in life and great force to sustain it, Ortadirek is primarily about the waning of the life force, how elderly men and women like Old Halil and Meryemce struggle against such loss, and how others respond to them during the anguish that accompanies this process.

Notes

1The idea of the title Iron Earth, Copper Sky being equivalent to the proverbial “between a rock and a hard place” comes from A.C. Brandabur and Nasser al-Hassan Athamneh, “Yaşar Kemal: The Life and Death of a Hero/Saint in The Other Face of the Mountain,” Toronto Review of Contemporary Writing Abroad, vol. 17, No. 3 (Summer 1999), 44–64. It can also be found in Turkish as “Yaşar Kemal: Dağın Öte Yüzü’nde Bir Kahraman/Erenmiş Yaşam ve Ölümü,” Adam Sanat 186 (Temmuz 2001), 20–39.

2The parenthetical citations indicate volume and page number of the trilogy in English translation, followed by the page numbers of the Turkish editions in brackets. The English editions, none of which meet scholarly standards of accuracy or completeness, are as follows:


The Turkish editions cited are the latest Yapı Kredi volumes, which will presumably remain the standard:
Yaşar Kemal, Ortadirek (İstanbul: Remzi Kitabevi, 1960; Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 1974; 2005).

Yer Demir Gök Bakır (İstanbul: Güven Yayın evi, 1963; Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 1976; 2006).

Ölmez Otu (İstanbul: Ant Yayınları, 1968; Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 1992; 2006).

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Ölmez Otu (İstanbul: Ant Yayınları, 1968; Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 1992; 2006).

The Wind from the Plain [Ortadirek] is reasonably complete, although there are some changes in chapter divisions in the English translation: Chapter 5 in the Turkish original is divided into chapters 5 and 6 in the English translation, so that the English version contains 19 chapters, whereas the Turkish original contains 18 chapters. Iron Earth, Copper Sky [Yer Demir Gök Bakır], the longest of the three volumes in Turkish, is drastically cut from 381 pages in Turkish to 220 pages in English, so that it is by far the shortest of the three volumes in English. The 47 chapters of the original Turkish are rearranged into 36 chapters in the English translation, and the first chapter alone is reduced from 24 pages in Turkish to slightly over 8 pages in the English translation, and leaves out, among other things, the children’s finding the skulls and bones of their ancestors, and the child Hasan’s fear of death — an important existential topic in the novel. The

Undying Grass [Ölmez Otu] is perhaps the most complete of the translations; at least the English translation comes closest to having the same number of pages as the original Turkish (322 versus 352), and the (unnumbered) Turkish chapters correspond to the English chapters.

3The words of the epigraph occur later, in the text of the novel, where they are recited by the Bald Minstrel in a state of ecstasy. Thilda Kemal renders them in the text in a more formal and elliptical manner: “Oh, leave me be, poverty, and cling not to my waist like a sash” (252) [306]. Gündeşlioğlu is an oral-tradition Anatolian bard who was performing in the Çukurova region during Yaşar Kemal’s youth in the 1930s.

4Yaşar Kemal on His Life and Art, tr. Eugene Lyons Hébert and Barry Tharaud, edited with an Introduction and notes by Barry Tharaud (Syracuse UP, 1999), 107.


Yaşar Kemal on His Life and Art, 2–3.
Understanding a literary text is fundamentally a matter of making connections. As translation theorist Raymond van den Broeck defines it, meaning in a text is “the total network of relations entered into by any linguistic form.” One’s level of understanding depends on the extent to which one is able to access this network. In order, for example, to fully understand a story I’m reading that refers to Macondo, I need to be able to connect what that story is saying to Gabriel García Márquez’s novel *Cien años de soledad* (which entails not just making the connection but more fundamentally having read the Garcia Márquez novel so I have it at my disposal for connecting). The more connections I can make, the more nuanced my understanding becomes. This connecting happens at the formal and lexical levels as well. To fully understand a villanelle that I’m reading, I need to be able to connect that concrete piece of writing to what I know of villanelles or other villanelles I’ve encountered. Or if I’m reading a specific word in a text, such as “kitsch” in the work of Milan Kundera, I need to be able to connect that use of the word “kitsch” not only to my own unique understanding of and experience with the word but also to Kundera’s other uses of and discourses on it.

To contemplate the types and quantity of connections necessary for understanding (as well as the ways in which understanding occurs in the presence or absence of these connections) can be a dizzying experience, one that tends to elude any sort of ultimate (can I say it?) understanding. How is it, after all, that we can communicate with each other at all with any sort of confidence? How is meaning forged when or if none exists initially? How does it lift itself up from its bootstraps? To explore these questions (if not to definitively answer them), it is useful to look at literary translation.

The problems of translation are not only, to paraphrase Borges, the same fundamental problems as those of poetry; they are also the problems of language and communication in general. Translators like to point out that the English “bread” is not the same as, not exactly equivalent to, the German “*brot*” or French “*pain*,” an observation that is absolutely true. Nevertheless, “bread” itself is never simply “bread” either. Just as the French “*pain*” is always going to differ from “*bread*” in terms of connotation and contextual and cultural embedding, “bread” is always going to differ from one English speaker to the next. Moreover, each and every usage of a word is unique and places that word in a context that will cause it to mean something different, if only slightly, from that very word in every other instance.

Let me turn to a tautology to illustrate: If I say “bread is bread,” the first “bread” does not and cannot mean the same thing as the second. As I read (and perhaps intend) the sentence, the first “bread” refers to actual physical bread, perhaps the loaf of whole wheat sitting on my counter at home right now. But the second “bread” refers more to the function of bread, nourishment perhaps, or else its commonplaceness. Certainly we can’t claim that these two instances of “bread” are any more alike than are “bread” and “*pain*.” To this point in this article and counting the following usage, I’ve used the word “bread” fifteen times, and no use is exactly equivalent to another (though the distinctions don’t tend to be as drastic in the tautological example I give above). To paraphrase Heraclitus, no one ever uses the same word twice.

Someone might object and say that the difference between some of the uses is infinitesimally small and that a reader perceives no difference. I would actually agree with that observation and note how it brings us back to the ways that communication happens...
in spite of itself: just as most people perceive no essential difference between two instances of “bread,” neither do they tend to distinguish between “bread” and “pain,” or between synonyms within a language such as “legally” and “lawfully.” To be overly aware of and focus too much on the differences between “bread” and “bread” and “bread” would render communication and certainly translation impossible. Hence the riddle (and perhaps miracle) of translation (and communication): nothing quite adds up, yet somehow it can all add up (and sometimes add up very well).

I’d like to provide the following example to demonstrate the problematic nature of meaning and how translation illustrates it. I’ve recently been translating the microfictions of Argentinean writer Ana María Shua. Below is the original of her piece “El hospital” (“The Hospital”) in its entirety:

Burros, hombres, lombrices, piedras enormes y quirúñcos se hacinan en el hospital. Que vergüenza para el gobierno, esto no es más que un revoltijo maloliente. No hay vendas, no hay remedios, no hay enfermeras, no hay tomógrafos, no hay ambulancias, no hay camas, no hay médicos, no hay laboratorio, no hay suero, no hay jeringas, no hay quirófano, no todos están heridos, no todos están enfermos, qué vergüenza, que vergüenza, es posible que ni siquiera sea un hospital.

And here is my translation of it:

(Donkeys, men, earthworms, enormous stones and armadillos are stacked in the hospital. What an embarrassment for the government, this is nothing but a stinking mess. There are no bandages, no cures, no nurses, no CT scanners, no ambulances, no beds, no doctors, no laboratory, no plasma, no syringes, no operating room, not everyone is hurt, not everyone is sick, what an embarrassment, an embarrassment, it’s possible this isn’t even a hospital.)

In the original Spanish, the piece begins with the word “burros,” which I initially translated as “burros.” Shua, however, whose command of English is quite good, objected. After I sent her a draft I had done of the piece, she wrote me with regard to my usage of “burros”:

¿Por qué mantenés “burros” en español y no ponés “donkeys”? Finalmente es algo más parecido a un sueño que al tercer mundo. (Why are you keeping the Spanish “burros” here instead of using “donkeys”? In the end it’s more a matter of a dream than the third world.)

As far as I was concerned as I made my initial translation of the piece, burros was burros. Burro is, after all, a very common English word, if not as common as donkey. My dictionary gives two definitions of burro: a small donkey, especially one used as a pack animal in the southwestern United States, and also just any donkey. If I do a Google search of English language internet pages for each term, I get 1,030,000 hits for burro to 3,540,000 for donkey. I would certainly have been within my rights as a translator to say “A burro is a donkey, and my translation is just fine.” But it’s not as simple as that, and I believe Shua was right in her critique. In the context of a piece of writing by a Latin American from Buenos Aires, “burros” could have provided a crucially wrong idea for the piece for many readers. It could have provided an inappropriate or false connection, a meaning that shouldn’t occur there. In the United States, burros do tend to be associated with the third world (think of Juan Valdez with his burro loaded with Colombian coffee). If the English version of the piece were to begin with “burros,” many readers would be likely to automatically understand the piece as some sort of third-world send-up. Shua’s status as a Latin American writer but one whose work is more likely to evoke cosmopolitan Buenos Aires than images of the third world essentially precludes the usage of the English word “burros” for the Spanish “burros” in the translation of this piece, a usage that would ironically perhaps be available for translations of the work of a non–Latin American writer in a different context.
Let me return to van den Broeck’s definition of meaning as “the total network of relations entered into by any linguistic form.” The total network of relations of the Shua piece above is, of course, infinite, as is the case with every text. When we speak of meaning we tend to speak of the areas of consensus, or the areas where we can at least recognize that someone else has made a valid connection. While it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss what constitutes a valid connection, there are certainly valid as well as invalid connections, as my discussion of the Shua piece above demonstrates. While translators may touch infinity in the process of rendering a text in a different language, we are ultimately constrained by the connections that authors and readers are apt to make or accept.
BORGESIAN REWRITING: BURTON’S ARABIAN NIGHTS

By Said Shiyab and Michael Stuart Lynch

One of the objectives of this article is to examine an instance of translation of The Arabian Nights to highlight philosophies, strategies, limitations and deviations that have occurred in translating an Arabic text into English. Samples of The Arabian Nights will be subjected to analysis to see whether or not a translator such as Richard Burton committed himself to rendering the connotative meanings of the original texts and (making allowances for his social and cultural context) how closely they adhere to the form and function of the original texts. This will lead to another objective of this article: the illustration of Jorge Luis Borges’s philosophy that translation is a re-writing of the source for the purpose of creating a new piece of writing.

There are many methodological irregularities as far as translations of The Arabian Nights are concerned. One rationale behind this analysis is to argue that the translations of The Arabian Nights raise issues of interest to fields as diverse as philosophy, history, and sociology (specifically the critique of Orientalism), as well as literature, linguistics, and translation studies. Unlike other Middle Eastern literature, awareness of The Arabian Nights is widespread in the West, seeping into its consciousness as text, movie, TV image, and even as video game, and yet translation studies — perhaps because of perceived ambiguities — has sometimes seemed to show a reluctance to address the issues involved with this work. Translators can profit from examination of why translations from the Arabic have received so much fame and publicity despite their inaccurate portrayal of the original. What read and misread elements of this text have contributed to its fame?

Translations of the Arabian Nights

This magnificent work has created an interest among a number of translators whose utmost endeavor was to convey the language at its best. Translators such as Richard Burton, William Lane, and Jean Antoine made varied attempts in their translations to convey the linguistic and cultural aspects of the text. Richard Burton (cited in Farwell 1999) claims that he had attempted to meticulously provide the English equivalent of every Arabic word, no matter how low or “shocking to the ears” it was, but all possible tact where the impropriety or immodesty was not intended was preserved, not exaggerating the vulgarities and the indecencies which, indeed, can hardly be exaggerated. Examination of the translation suggests that this is a simplification. Escshewing the simple image of Burton as martyr to the Puritans, Borges disputes the second of these claims, suggesting that he courted controversy. Burton was not as different from other translators as he claimed. There are many lines of poetry in the original that were dropped or inappropriately paraphrased.¹ (There is much to suggest that he, like other translators, translated against previous versions: a Bloomian translator’s “anxiety of influence”).² So in the story of King Shahrayar and his brother Shahzaman, Burton translated the Arabic in a way in which he freely deleted and amended the text. Many of the details in the original are simply glossed over, such as the women’s talk about their “taboo objects” in the porter’s tale. Here is an example (Shiyab’s translation) of a section Burton deleted in his translation:

They continued to drink until the wine took over their senses and reason, and, after that moment, the first queen’s maid [or gatekeeper] stood up and took off all her clothes, appearing completely naked; then, she let down her long hair to cover her naked body. She then jumped into the fountain, and started playing with the water, washing her body, and filling her mouth with water and shooting and
spouting it at the porter. Again, she washed her body parts and that which was between her thighs, then got out of the fountain, threw herself into the porter’s lap and said: “Sweetheart, what is this?” pointing to her vagina. Then the second also threw herself in the fountain naked and then into the porter’s lap and also said: “Sweetheart, what is this?” pointing to her vagina. “Your vagina,” the porter answered. “Are you not ashamed of yourself?” shouted the girl, and, holding him from the neck, started beating him. “Then it is your Buttercup!” “No, no,” she shouted, shaking her head. The three started slapping and laughing, until his skin turned red. “Then tell me what you call it!” the porter shouted. “Open sesame,” the girl replied. As one can see in the above quote, we have chosen the word “vagina” for the Arabic 
farjiha. (“Open sesame” is not a widely understood Arabic expression. Literally, we might write “peeled sesame.”) A quick comparison between Burton’s translation and the Arabic text indicates that Burton did not translate the above text at all. Could it be because he does not want to offend his puritan English reader or is it because he believes that the language is inherently offensive? What is puzzling here is that there were cases where Burton took complete liberty in rendering the Arabic text, not taking into account whether such a rendition upsets his English reader. Here is an example of a “liberty” Burton took in translating the Arabian Nights:

Then the lady took the cup, and drank it off to her sisters’ health, and they ceased not drinking (the Porter being in the midst of them), and dancing and laughing and reciting verses and singing ballads and ritornellos. All this time the Porter was carrying on with them, kissing, toy ing, biting, handling, groping, fingering; whilst one thrust a dainty morsel in his mouth, and another slapped him; and thisuffed his cheeks, and that threw sweet flowers at him; and he was in the very paradise of pleasure, as though he were sitting in the seventh sphere among the Houris of Heaven (62).

It could be that Burton bowed to his Puritan audience. The offensiveness of the effectively deleted passage may seem obvious for the time in question. If the reason behind Burton’s translation of the Arabian Nights was to entertain the English reader, he failed to do so by deleting this and similar sections. If he wanted to be faithful to the Arabic text, as he claims on many different occasions, he once again failed to do so. The ethics of translation would suggest that he should at least indicate that a cut has been made. Was Burton personally shy to render the detailed, matter-of-fact language manifested in the Arabic for reasons of his own residual Puritan subjectivity? Was he trying to please a group of people whom he regarded as excessively strict in morals and religion? Ideally, if he had another audience, would Burton have delivered these “vulgar and obscene” words and images?

[Dawood in 1954 does translate this passage and uses the various terms “gateway to heaven,” “crack,” and “your thing” for our “vagina” (247). While you can appreciate his mild circumspection for his readership, the reader is misled that the Arabic does not explicitly name the part and uses different terms. Similarly we would suggest on the next page “cock” rather than his “sturdy mule which feeds on buttercups,” not personal poetry of his (though no doubt Borges would have approved!) This term in Dawood is also in the Arabic texts. (The Arabic texts have indications of censorship, such as references to expressions that must have occurred earlier (that do not make sense)]. (Dawood’s choice of “body parts” for organs (“washing the body parts”) is a felicitous choice accurate to the Arabic and idiomatic in the English.)

There are other instances that show that Burton’s translation into English uses great license and could not be said to be attempting the most accurate rendering of the original.3
The following text from the Arabic was deleted by the prudish Lane but translated by Burton [Translation (1)]:

But when the night was half spent he bethought him that he had forgotten in his palace somewhat which he should have brought with him, so he returned privily and entered his apartments, where he found the Queen, his wife, asleep on his own carpet-bed embracing with both arms a black cook of loathsome aspect and foul with kitchen grease and grime. When he saw this, the world waxed black before his sight and he said, “If such case happen while I am yet within sight of the city what will be the doings of this damned whore during my long absence at my brother’s court?” So he drew his scymitar and, cutting the two in four pieces with a single blow, left them on the carpet and returned presently to his camp without letting anyone know of what had happened (6).

The above-translated text is vivid to the English reader; however, the translator has pidgined the original text on a number of occasions: “if such case happen” (not “if such happens”) just one example. Using such an expression, the translation does not express all the textual elements manifested in the original. Periodizing, it is neither a literal translation of the Arabic nor idiomatic contemporary (nineteenth-century) English. Burton’s claim to literal translation of the text ignores the effects of his omissions and deletions on the reader. Some of his additions, such as “cutting the two in four pieces with a single blow, left them on the carpet,” indicate his predisposed portrayal of a society’s vulgarity and savageness, that is, Orientalism. Such expressions are dubious except for depicting a graphic image. The famous addition of exotic color “black cook of loathsome aspect and foul with kitchen grease” obscures the fact that the servants were African to help prevent miscegenation, to ensure the sheikh’s patrimony: a cultural logic (however much we may disagree with it).

**Orientalism and the Sense of Otherness**

We would stress two points in the framing story, which concludes in the Sheikh killing a virgin every morning. First, the Oriental despotism of having the political power of killing someone at your whim would have been a phantasmagorical Other for the target Arab audience, say middle-class Egyptians, as much as for a Western audience, but the alien world would have been a time in the distant mythical past, not just an other region and people (transcribed as the contemporary Oriental Other). As John Stephens and Robyn McCallum write: “The Orient depicted in *The Arabian Nights* is another medieval fantasy world, already constructed as a fantastic Other by that medieval world itself subsequently reconstructed as a fantastic Other by the modern West” (230). Second, the creation of this Other stops the identification the text painstakingly constructs at the beginning of the tale. Ali Behdad argues: “the return of a repressed fascination with the Other, through whose differentiating function European subjectivity has often defined itself since the Crusades” (39). The Western reader under the thrall of Orientalist discourses does not take the sheikh’s existential dilemma to heart. When the protagonist’s desire turns out to be “worldly,” not as special as he felt it to be, he seeks the experience of others (men) and finds that even in an ideal case of an “object of desire” that is taken away from the world by drastic lengths, corruption is still possible. Of course, in treating women as possessions, the feminist interpretation of events is never far from the hermeneutics of the text — locking the woman in a trunk, how faithful is the man as these things are going on — but most depictions of the obsessive dilemma of desire rely on an unreasonably egotistic sphere of contemplation (Proust’s callousness, for instance, to take one of a great number of examples). Unconscious responses to the “fearsomeness” of women are not culturally specific.
The exotic covers over the existential and more universal elements the story seeks to convey. So Burton’s sentence: “And behold it was a Jinni, huge of height and burly of breast and bulk, broad of brow and black of skin, bearing on his head a coffer of crystal” (12) might be rendered (Shiyab): “And there was a Jinni of tall stature and wide breast who had a box on his head.” The structure of the text would encourage a view that the brothers are thrust into their discovery, that their discovery of the “facts of womanhood” is their destiny, outside their personal intentions, that they study their dilemma with seriousness and due deliberation, and that the reader (or at least one gender of readers) should identify with them. Accepting the magnified agency of the protagonists, not just as the politics of a realm understood as an Other but as the sign of the actualized adult, the becoming of the Fairy Tale (c.f. Said and Bettleheim), we have the subject finding his object of desire is not what he hoped for; the cynical bachelor who swears off women; the Don Juan who will not be entangled. The form of the original, a fable with its magnified fantastic elements, such as a woman in the possession of a djinn (the experimental control, the wanton woman outside his family), discourages political analysis. The drastic solution of killing the partner, the despotism of absolute power manifested in summary execution and the hypocrisy of trading in women but expecting absolute chasteness are strange, but without the strategy of Orientalizing the text — something that happens over there — the situation is apolitically fantastic. When you are the “over there” (and not just because you know your society does not work in such a way) you will see it as a moral allegory and a comment on the existential situation. In order not to identify with the protagonist, you need an entrenched sense of Otherness. It can be argued that the behavior of the Sultan creates this, and there is truth in this, but the weight of Oriental discourse cannot be discounted here.

From a linguistic perspective, we see that Burton attempted to use a language that is close to the reader’s perceptions of the literature, which did not fear distorting the form and therefore the content of the original. Here is Shiyab’s translation of the text (page 6, Burton)

[Translation (2):]

At about midnight, he remembered that he had forgotten in his palace something which he should have brought with him; so he returned and entered his palace, then went into his apartments, where he found the queen, his wife, asleep on his own bed, embracing with both arms, a black slave. When he saw this, the world became black before his sight and he said to himself: “If such a case happens while I am yet within sight of the city, what will this damned whore do during my long absence at my brother’s court”? So he drew his sword, killing both of them in bed, and returned presently to his camp. He then continued his journey to his brother’s city (alf lailah wa laila, 1, p. 6).

If one looks carefully at both translations, while comparing them with the original, one can see that the second translation is closer to the original in form and content. Translation (1) distorts the message by adding new graphic images, whereas translation (2) preserves the image in the Arabic. Translation (2) respects the target-language culture while portraying the text, whereas translation (1) incites images of barbarianism and cruelty, additions or omissions affecting the reader’s perception of the text.

The following passage (Shiyab) from Qamar Al Zaman contradicts Burton’s claim both that he wants to be graphic in his description and that he wants to maintain the peculiarities of the style of the Arabic original, the “striking turns” and novel expressions of the original in all their nonsensicality:

And when she saw that he was without pants, she placed her hand under his shirts and felt his legs, and as his skin was very smooth, her hand slipped and touched his penis, and her
heart ached and punched with desire, for the lust of women is greater than the lust of men, and she felt embarrassed (alf lailah wa laila, 2, p. 130).

The specific textual elements of the original have a “color” and “spiciness” in Arabic worth conveying as “accurately” (or perhaps “neutrally”) as possible. (The passage was omitted by Lane.) Burton came up with the following translation:

Then she thrust her hand into his breast and, because of the smoothness of his body, it slipped down to his waist and thence to his navel and thence to his yard, whereupon her heart ached and her vitals quivered and lust was sore upon her, for the desire of women is fiercer than the desire of men, and she was ashamed of her own shamelessness.

A cursory look at the above translation shows that, contrary to expectation, it is more modest than the previous one. We might assume that references to body parts are non-specific and vague so as to be less offensive to the reader. Given Burton’s championing of the fight against censorship, we wonder, then, why the translator had to resort to replacing the word “skin” with “body” and “penis” with “yard”? Other than reneging on his own crusade against Victorianism, he might have made the changes to be different from other translators or produce his own sense of elegance.

If Burton wants to be graphic here, why not convey the taboo word (penis) that is in the Arabic text? The boys-own-adventure, knowing-manliness, nautical term “yard” is a telling indicator of the British, Romantic “upper-class board and club rooms” projection of the escapist ship’s life/exotic ports tales. It is the perceived antithesis of the conservative Victorian center. We can say that all the changes made to the original texts were to suit if not entertain the English reader, altering the experience of The Arabian Nights. The portraying of the meanings of the original texts was not an overwhelming priority.

**Borges’s Philosophy of Translation**

There are of course a nearly infinite number of ways of rendering a text, each conveying a shade of difference of meaning within the new (other language) text. The above analysis does not seek to condemn the translator’s production of a new piece of literature. Translators must take the liberty of rewriting the text and cannot be confined to one way of approaching the text, although the extent to which they preserve meanings in the original makes their work more interesting (particularly for those who would compare the new pieces produced with each new translation). (And of course we know empirically that in the present case, The Arabian Nights is interesting and so translations are served well by being “close” to the original.) Each new translation gives us a new author to study.

Jorge Luis Borges, a translator all his life, as well as a Canon writer, belongs to this school of thinking that each translation is a new work deserving independent assessment. To him, translation is only an interpretation of the text, different readings unavoidable, particularly of literary texts. Borges believes that reading a text is a form of translating it. To this effect, translators, such as Burton, adopt many different methods of approaching a text, and this, in fact, spurs many different translations. No matter how passages were translated, it was evident that translators used whatever was at their disposal to transmit the text from one language to another. Even within the same translation, different translation methods are often used. Translators cannot and should not try to produce the same form and content, simply because the translation of text will change the form, and this will always be at the expense of textual meaning. Borges argued that translation is a matter of choice; the freer the translation, that is, the more the translator cared about the new text as a new piece of literature, the better the outcome. At issue is
the practice of modifying an anonymous collective text, which was the wellspring of literature up until its abandonment at about the time of Shakespeare in favor of the bourgeois ideological and legalistic imposition of the individual whose “rights” as the “named author” prevented additions and modifications.

Conclusion

In our previous article we suggested that there were two poles of translation between which a translator must make choices as to how to translate a work. Both are reasonable options, with strengths and drawbacks. The form of a literary work being crucial to its content, the transformation from one language to another must be a violent one, and compromises must be made. There is no perfect solution. A translator can choose a literal translation that captures more of the features of the language of the original but necessarily sounds strange to the reader of the translation, or he can substitute idiomatic and grammatical norms of the second language. Thus, if Naguib Mahfouz uses what is considered by an Arabic speaker to be simple but elegant Arabic in a prose story, the translator could use elegant English (and cut out some of the repetitions that are the norm in the original language), or he could make the reader more aware of the Arabic original.

Borges discussed these two options when commenting on the Newman-Arnold debate ("The Translators of The Thousand and One Nights" in The Total Library). Although Borges was not adverse to making drastic changes to a text he was translating, such as changing the gender of a swallow in Wilde’s "The Happy Prince," at other times he chose "an almost literal translation," as for Virginia Woolf’s Orlando (Kristal 37, 40, quoting Borges in María Esther Vázquez, Borges: Sus días y su tiempo). He had no fixed position on which of these possibilities (and the spectrum between them) was the better option, sometimes advocating one, sometimes the other, condemning the distortion of the original by the epistemic perceptions of the translator, or praising the same phenomena. Always the subjectivity of his judgments to the fore, his reasons reside in the accompanying explanation (discourse), the process of translation nuanced, full of subtle choices of which compromise to take, deep within the subject’s construction (informed by a lifetime’s reading). Enjoyment of the English Arabian Nights is enhanced by its many versions, one of which, by the author Burton, we have discussed here.

Notes

1 For example, the regular incipit balaghani ?ayyuha al maliku is absent in the translation, often replaced by a simple “once upon a time” or “there was” or “there lived,” etc. The sentence wa adraka Sharazad assabaha faskattu an al kalam al mubaah, which comes at the end of each episode, also never appears in the translations. Such stylistic irregularities were a common practice among most translators, who took liberties in translating the Arabian Nights.

2 Harold Bloom suggests that Borges was in denial about his “anxiety of influence” (470). However, given Borges’s priority, this may be a display of Bloom’s own “anxiety.” Said (159) recounts Edward William Lane’s own “anxiety” with regard to his An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians (1836) and Description de l’Égypte (1809–28). The same is true for his successor: “Burton, for example, would deal with the Arabain Nights or with Egypt indirectly, through Lane’s work, by citing his predecessor, challenging him even though he was granting him very great authority” (176) and “Everything Burton wrote testifies to this combativeness, rarely with more candid contempt for his opponents than in the preface to his translation of the Arabian Nights” (194).

3 Some Islamic concepts were replaced with Western ones. For example, the Arabic phrase al hamdullilah was replaced by a non-Arabic phrase “Thanksgiving.”
Although Edward Lane has a reputation for censorship, his precise and lucid language, attention to detail, and exact images give us passages we could not imagine in Burton. Describing an ambassador leaving king Shahzaman’s court, carrying a letter for his brother, he gives us a note on “the letter of Muslims,” which defines the physical object clearly and precisely, in a carefully thought out manner. His description of the paper is meticulous:

The paper was thick, and highly polished: sometimes it is ornamented with flowers of gold… The upper half is generally left blank: and the writing never occupies any portion of the second side… The name of the person to whom the letter is addressed… commonly occurs in the first sentence, preceded by several titles of honor: sometimes it is written in letters of gold, or red ink… the letter is generally folded twice… and enclosed in a cover of paper, upon which is written… “it shall arrive, if it be the will of God, whose name be exalted, at such a place, and be delivered into the hand of our honored friend, etc, such a one, whom God preserve.” Sometimes it is placed in a small bag, or purse, of silk embroidered with gold.

In his article on Lane’s work in the London and Westminster Review, Leigh Hunt (cited in Leila Ahmed 1978: 141) believes that Lane’s work marked “an epoch in the history of popular Eastern literature,” for it was profoundly to alter the experience of reading the Arabian Nights for the English reader. Furthermore, as expressed in the Monthly Review, Lane’s re-translation was also to alter the text to a certain degree; it was through his notes to the work that he was to alter it most profoundly: to alter it by clarifying fully the forms, images, manners, and beliefs referred to in the Arabian Nights, and by binding it irrevocably with the Arabian world, and with reality (see Ahmed for more details).


Works Cited
ON TRANSLATING CAMFRANGLAIS AND OTHER CAMEROUNISMES

By Peter Wuteh Vakunta

Camfranglais is a hybrid language spoken in the Republic of Cameroon where English, French, and close to 250 indigenous languages coexist. It consists of a mixture of French, English, Pidgin, and borrowings from local languages. Kouega defines Camfranglais as “a composite language consciously developed by secondary school pupils who have in common a number of linguistic codes, namely French, English and a few widespread indigenous languages” (23). Cameroonian youths tend to use this language as a communication code in order to exclude other members of the community. In other words, they use it to exchange ideas in such a way that the information would sound mysterious to non-members.

Some examples of Camfranglais expressions that one would hear in the streets and school circles in Cameroon include:

Tu play le damba tous les jours? = do you play soccer every day?
Je veux go = I want to go.
Il est come = he has come.
Tout le monde hate me, wey I no know pourquoi = everyone hates me but I don’t know why.
J’ai buy l’aff-ci au bateau = I bought this stuff in the market.
Je vais te see tomorrow = I will see you tomorrow.
Elle est sortie nayo nayo = she went out very slowly.
Tu as sleep où hier? = where did you pass the night yesterday?
Tu as go au school? = did you go to school?
Il fia même quoi = what is he really afraid of?!

It is the use of terms such as “damba,” “see,” “tomorrow,” “pourquoi,” “nayo nayo,” “fia,” “bateau,” “aff,” and “buy” that may make understanding difficult for older people who are monolingual speakers of French or English. It is clear from these examples that the sentence structure of Camfranglais is calqued on the French syntactic structure. Each utterance above contains at least one English, Pidgin, or indigenous language word like “play,” “go,” “come,” “hate,” “know,” “nayo nayo,” etc.

This language blend has been developed by urban youths to talk about daily events that are of interest to them, namely dating, entertainment, sports, money, physical looks, and so forth. Camfranglais serves its adolescent speakers as an icon of “resistance identity” (Castells 1997). In other words, they create and constantly transform this sociolect by manipulating lexical items from various Cameroonian and European languages, in an effort to mark off their identity as a new social group — the modern Cameroonian urban youth — in opposition to other groups such as the older generation, the rural population, and the elite. It is a composite language that resembles a pidgin in that it results from contact between several languages (Kouega 2003). To render their language incomprehensible to outsiders, speakers of Camfranglais use various techniques of word formation such as borrowing from various languages, coinage, elision, affixation, inversion, and reduplication.

Camfranglais first emerged in the mid-1970s after the reunification of Francophone Cameroun and Anglophone Southern Cameroons. It became fashionable in the late 1990s, due partially to its use by popular musicians such as Lapiro de Mbanga, Petit Pays, and others. Kouega (2003) gives a striking account of the social distribution of Camefranglais:

An impressionistic inspection of the profession of fluent
Camfranglais speakers outside school premises reveals that they are peddlers, and laborers, hair stylists and barbers, prostitutes and vagabonds, rank and file soldiers and policemen, thieves and prisoners, gamblers and con men, musicians and comedians, to name just the most popular ones (513). The lexical manipulation, phonological truncation, morphological hybridization, hyperbolic and dysphemistic extensions characteristic of Camfranglais reflect the provocative attitude of its speakers and their jocular disrespect of linguistic norms and purity, clearly revealing its function as an anti-language (Halliday 1977). Although this lingua franca functions like other slangs all over the world, it is somewhat unique in that it combines elements from French, English, and Pidgin and Cameroonian native languages.

In an article titled “Le Camfranglais, Un cousin du Verlan?” (1989), Michel Lobé Ewané draws striking parallels between Camfranglais and Verlan, a slang language spoken by young people in the French banlieue (suburbs). Verlan was invented as a secret code by youths, drug users, and criminals to communicate freely in front of authority figures (parents and police). Here is a translation of Ewané’s article:

Among the youths of every generation, there is always a speech code reserved for initiates. Camfranglais was invented by students at the University of Yaoundé about ten years ago as a result of the imposition of bilingual curricula on them by the state. It first saw the light of day at a time when students came face to face with the reality of a national bilingual education policy which compelled them to take courses in a language in which they were not proficient: French for Anglophone students and English for Francophone students. It started as a joke. Students wanted a mode of communication that would distinguish them from other segments of the population. Camfranglais has come to stay. It has become widespread and deep-rooted.

The scene described below is one of those incidents that occur on a daily basis in the streets of Yaoundé. It is an account of a traffic accident in which a posh car has just run over a dog. The forces of law and order are interrogating eye-witnesses. Among the people being interrogated, there is a recalcitrant young man who explains in an unusual lingo why he will not testify:

Tu nyai mon pied? C’est les mberés qui ont book. One day j’ai seulement nyé une aff, je n’était pas inside, on m’a tcha, on m’a put au ngata. On m’a dit sost j’ai moto […] Papa! a no dé fo’dé fo sé ka sé dans kin’a dog na dog for djintété. Dan kin’a matoa na matoa for djintété. Lep me je broute ma granut nayo yah!”

This strange language is “Camfranglais,” and the story recounted is the subject of a popular play written by the talented Cameroonian playwright Essindi Mindja. Could this be described as linguistic vandalism or banditry? Is it rather an invention akin to the French argot called Verlan? Could this be perceived as the manifestation of cultural creativity conditioned by a linguistic environment in which official languages (English and French) have been taken hostage by indigenous languages?

In any event, Camfranglais, a hybrid language composed of borrowings from French, English, Pidgin, and Cameroonian indigenous languages (Duala, Ewondo, Bassa, etc.), has become a popular lingua franca among high school and college students in Cameroon. The rampant use of this language in academic circles is a great cause for concern for English and French language teachers and professors. According to a certain professor, this language translates not only the rejection by Cameroonian youths of foreign languages imposed on them but also the adoption of a sophisticated mode of expression that is intelligible to members of a select group. Camfranglais is a linguistic melting-pot comprising at least four different languages. Its
vocabulary, syntax, imagery, accent, and pronunciation are constantly being remodeled according to rules formulated on the basis of new findings by members of this restricted circle. The end result has been the birth of a jargon intelligible to high school and college students as well as the rank and file.

The syntactic structure of Camfranglais is calqued on French syntax. Inside the sentence, some words are replaced by either English words that may be conjugated as in French, or by words borrowed from one of the indigenous languages, namely Duala, Ewondo, or Pidgin. Example: “J’ai tcha (pris) le métro et vous knowez (savez qui vient de “to know”) qu’il ne run (roule) pas vite. Another example: Je te give (donne, ici, je te payes) huit kolo fap (8500 CFA Francs in Pidgin). The origin and etymology of Camfranglais words are diverse.

It seems to me that Camfranglais has borrowed a lot from the French Verlan, as exemplified in the following sentence: “La nga (ou la meute, c’est-à-dire la nana) dont je t’ai tok (parlé) m’a bondi (m’a snobé). Recourse to the word “bondir” is justified by the impression the speaker wants to create in the mind of the listener. He wants to underscore the idea of being given the cold shoulder by a girl he admires. The image created by this usage may have far-reaching ramifications, especially when it is affiliated with an English language lexicon. For example, “Je suis filingué (attiré) par cette nga.” The word “filingué,” coined from the English “feeling,” could also be used in reference to a singer, performer, or even a professor that one admires.

In sum, Camfranglais is chap (difficult) to understand, chap to tchatcher (speak). It is the lingo of students and the working class distinct from the business language of pacho (papa). Our pretty girls speak it too. There are countless synonyms at the disposal of Camfranglais speakers. The following words refer to “woman”: Wa, Nga, Meute, Gnoxe (the word ngoxer is often used to mean “make love,” etc. Political and economic events in Cameroon have favored the rapid evolution of this language. Neologisms are being created day in and day out to replace old ones. For example, because of the economic crisis in Cameroon attributed to the severe austerity measures imposed on the citizens by the International Monetary Fund (MF), it is now common to hear Camfranglais speakers say: “Le Cameroun est fnisé (soumis aux contraintes du FMI).” The language has become so popular that renowned musicians are using it as a medium of self-expression. They find the humor, imagination, and inventiveness of the anonymous creators of Camfranglais very appealing. Prepositions, concord, and the gender of nouns are all muddled up. The context of communication is that of everyday life: friendship, school, love, courtship, parents, dating, leisure….

One of Cameroon’s musical virtuosos, Lapiro de Mbanga, whose latest release caused a furor last summer, talked about “Big Katica for Ngola.” The clip was censured for some time because the expression Big Katica actually refers to the President of the Republic. Katica is an indigenous word designating someone who invites friends to a game of poker, and Ngola is the original name for the capital city, Yaoundé. It is evident that Camfranglais has its own coded political lexicon. Camfranglais is considered “cool” not only by high school and college students, but also by some youthful teachers. A few years ago, a high school teacher brought the question of Camfranglais into the limelight in a letter addressed to the editor of one of the local newspapers, Cameroon Tribune. Ironically, his letter was published only ten years later in a bi-weekly, Weekend Tribune, in a column devoted to Camfranglais. Here is what the teacher said: “As far as I am concerned, Camfranglais is a language associated with ease of communication. We, the youths, want to simplify everything. In fact, we want to prove to everyone that we are learning several languages, and that we are capable of achieving alchemy of words…. We must not lose sight of the fact that languages taught in school are poorly mastered.”
This view was corroborated by remarks made by the national pedagogic adviser for the French language, who claims: “I do not view the use of Camfranglais by our students as constituting a learning obstacle. However, if this new code became worrisome, it would be necessary to integrate it into our national language syllabi in order to make learners aware of the risks they may run by using it. The school milieu is governed by rules. So it is a safe-guard.”

The birth of Camfranglais in Cameroon is not an isolated occurrence in Africa. Moussa or Nouchis (the lingo of the Loubards in Treichville) in Ivory Coast is analogous. Undoubtedly, these creolized linguistic varieties will soon become the language of theater and cinema, as has been the case with pidginized French used by humorous playwrights such Jean Miché Kankan and Daniel Ndo in Cameroon. With their black humor, these playwrights have no reason to be envious of French Verlan speakers.

All in all, it is clear from Michel Lobé Ewané’s article that Camfranglais has clear social functions. It signals rebellion against authority and societal expectations. It is often associated with opposition to authority figures. In addition to switching to a code that most adults will not understand, Camfranglais provides a “cover” for the use of taboo forms as well as “covert” prestige for those who identity with this linguistic variety.

A number of Cameroonian fiction writers have begun to transcribe Camfranglais and other Camerounismes in their creative writing. Here are a few examples of Cameroonianisms that a reader is likely to find in a Cameroonian novel or play of French expression:

On dit quoi? = quoi de neuf?
On va porter le même pantalon = je ne te lâche pas.
Le dehors est mauvais = les temps sont durs/difficiles
Grever = organizer/mener une grève.
Faites-moi le changement de 1000 francs CFA = donnez-moi la monnaie de 1000 francs CFA.

Appuyer une nana = avoir des rapports sexuels avec elle.
Cogner un plat de riz = le manger avec appétit.
Fesser un enfant = lui donner une fessée.
On t’a cherché avec ton ami = ton ami t’a cherché.
On est ensemble! = A bientôt! /On se tient au courant!
Il se comporte = il agit bien/ il prend ses responsabilités.
Tu es là depuis? = ça fait longtemps que tu m’attends?

Lexical items borrowed from Cameroon indigenous languages are gradually finding their way into Camfranglais. I have selected a couple of examples from Kouega’s article for purposes of illustration:

Kongolibon = close-shaven
Kumbu = big dish
Longo-longo = tall and usually slim
Mbambe = someone who does hard labor for a wage
Mbut = idiot
Mimbo = alcoholic drink
Jobajo = locally brewed beer
Odontol = home-distilled liquor
Mola = man
Mof-me-de! = piss-off!
Nayo-nayo = very slowly
Ndoh = money
Ndomo = hit someone in a fight
Tara = friend
Toum = sell
Villakonkon = rustic; uncivilized person
Weh-heh! = exclamation expressing pity
Wolowoss = prostitute
Jambo = gambling

In his latest detective novels, Cameroon’s celebrated novelist, Mongo Beti, has transcribed Camfranglais and other Cameroonianisms into French. In Trop de soleil tue l’amour (1999), Beti inserts Cameroonianisms such as: “Quand le grand chef disparaît de chez nous là pour passer deux mois à Baden-Baden là, tu vas même lui dire
que quoi? Je te demande, Norbert, qui va même lui dire que quoi?” (120). Announcing the death and burial of his mother to his boss, the same character has recourse to a typical Cameroonianism: “Mais non, grand, ce n’est pas la même; nous sommes en Afrique non? Quand je dis ma mère, ce n’est pas toujours celle qui m’a accouché, vous savez bien; grand, vous êtes Africain, non?” (120). In Branle-bas en noir et blanc (2000), Beti writes: “C’est comme les bordelles, il faut passer à la casserole” (23).

In a poem titled “Identity Crisis,” Cameroonian poet Peter Vakunta (2001) has recourse to Camfranglais in order to express his dual identity:

I don’t quite know who I am.
Je ne sais pas au juste qui je suis.
Some call me Anglo;
D’autres m’appellent Frog.

I still don’t know who I am
Je ne sais toujours pas qui je suis.
My name c’est Le Bamenda;
My name is L’Ennemi dans la maison;
My name c’est le Biafrais;
Mon nom is second-class citizen;
My name c’est le maladroit.

Taisez-vous! Shut up!
Don’t bother me!
Ne m’embêtez pas!
Don’t you know that je suis ici chez moi?
Vous ignorez que I belong here?
I shall fight to my dernier souffle
to forge a real name pour moi-même.
You shall call me Anglofrog!
Vous m’appelerez Franglo!

Shut up! Taisez-vous!
Don’t bother me!
Ne m’embêtez pas!
Vous ignorez que I belong here?
Don’t you know that je suis ici chez moi?
I shall fight to my last breath
to forge a real lingo for myself.
I’ll speak Français;

Je parlerai English
Together we’ll speak camfranglais;
C’est-à-dire qu’ensemble,
We’ll speak le Camerounisme,
Because ici nous sommes tous chez nous (10).
A bon entendeur salut!
He who has ears should hear!

Anyone with the remotest interest in literary translation cannot help but ask the nagging question: what are the implications of this usage for the translator? As literary critic Paul Bandia has pointed out: “The difficulty of translating pidgins and creoles in the African novel lies in the fact that there is hardly any direct equivalent relationship between English-based pidgins and French-based pidgins in West Africa” (103). Yet Camfranglais and other forms of Cameroonianisms are charged with sociocultural information that reveals a lot about the characters in the narrative as we have seen in Ewané’s article. It is, therefore, of crucial importance to retain these linguistic variants in the translation process because they are used by the creative writer to capture the sociocultural context of the novels. Eugene Nida has underscored the importance of maintaining dialectal forms in the translation process as follows:

More frequently the dialect forms used by writers are either horizontal (geographical) or vertical (socioeconomic) dialects, and rarely do authors or translators consistently represent all the details of such dialects, but at least certain easily recognized features are selected that serve to signal the type of dialect being used. A form such as “y’all” is supposed to typify Southern American English, and bold “bird” and “goil” “girl” are supposed to represent the Lower East Side of New York City. The problem for the translator is to find in a foreign language a dialect with approximately the same status and connotations. Rarely is the dialect
match fully successful, for the values associated with a particular dialect are often highly specific.

The aim of this article has not been to provide a framework for resolving potential translation problems that may arise from the use of Camfranglais or other forms of Camerounismes in creative writing. Our objective has been to acquaint the reader with the emergence of a new linguistic code whose usage in African literature is likely to present the translator with peculiar problems. Africans of all backgrounds use blended languages such as Camfranglais, Pidgin, Moussa, and Nouchis as a means of ensuring group solidarity within a community of practice. Creative writers use these mixed varieties to translate the sociocultural contexts that inform and structure their narratives. Ivorian writer Ahmadou Kourouma’s recourse to linguistic hybridization in three of his novels, Les soleils des indépendances (1968), Monnè: outrages et défis (1993), and En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages (1998), has been described by literary critic Gyasi as “a creative translation process that leads to the production of a Malinke text in French and the development of an authentic African discourse” (151). Kourouma echoes Gyasi when he evokes translation in his work: “J’ai donné libre cours à mon tempérament en distordant une langue classique trop rigide pour que ma pensée s’y meuve” (8). The reader of Les soleils des indépendances is able to detect what may be termed a new African mode of storytelling. Kourouma uses a hybrid code that forces the non–Malinke speaker to refer to the novelist’s native language and culture for signification. This is because the writer’s use of “Malinkalized” French leads to the production of a third code, characterized by an authentic African discourse.

An experienced translator working on the fiction of Mongo Beti and other Cameroonian writers would, I believe, achieve functional equivalence by having recourse to a communicative translation model. Using such a model is of critical importance, given that a translation is supposed to have the same impact on the target language receptors as the original did on the source language recipients.

Notes

2Tu m’as bien regardé? C’est vous les flics qui ont été à l’école. Un jour, j’étais témoin d’une affaire. Je n’y étais pour rien, mais on m’a arrêté et m’a mis en prison… On m’a dit que j’étais coupable. Papa! Ce genre d’histoire ne m’intéresse pas car ce chien c’est le chien d’un grand monsieur. Cette voiture c’est la voiture d’un riche. Laissez-moi en paix dans mon coin. [Who are you taking me for? It’s you, policemen, who have been to school. One day I was witness to an incident in which I was not involved. The police arrested me and threw me in jail. They said I was guilty. This kind of stuff doesn’t interest me at all. This dog belongs to some big shot, and this car is owned by some rich person. Let me go in peace.]
3J’ai pris le métro et vous savez qu’il ne roule pas vite. [I took the subway and you know that it doesn’t run fast].
4Je te payes huit mille cinq cent francs CFA [I will pay you eight thousand five hundred CFA francs].
5La nana dont je t’ai parlé m’a ignoré [The girl I talked to you about has snubbed me].
6Je suis attiré par cette nana (I admire this girl).
7[Difficult to understand and speak].
8Subjected to the constraints of the IMF.
9Cameronianisms.
11Patron.
12Mis au monde.
13Putes.
Works Cited
Virgil is suddenly newsy” reports the *New York Times*. Nicholas Kristof invokes the *Aeneid* as a “tale of war and empire, and a constant subtext is how easy it is to be uncivilized when promoting civilization. [...] In war, moderation is the first casualty.” Robert Fagles, distinguished translator of Homer, has just published a new *Aeneid* “…for our age, if not necessarily for the ages,” according to *The Atlantic Monthly* blurb (November 2006). In the words of reviewer Edward Rothstein, the successful vision of Fagles “…makes the *Aeneid* strong and somber and prescient, […] exhorting ‘empires to behave.’”

Niall Rudd recently quipped “There are as many *Aeneids* as readers.” Although any translation can only aim at an approximation to the original, yet, like myself, some readers and Virgilian scholars might think immediately of the antecedents appropriated by Fagles. He cites (402) four previous prose translations, nine in verse. In addition to these, he evokes Dryden’s 1697 “unapproachable” rhymed rendering, “…perhaps,” he observes, “the most Virgilian poem that I know in English” (403). Professor Fagles modestly calls his free verse version just another “performance,” and it seems apposite to evaluate in a small way his accomplishment, a “marvelous new translation” of an undying and cunning poem (for Nicholas Kristof). I have excerpted nearly all, plus a few others, the translations referenced by Fagles (see Works Cited) and aim in these few pages to hold his work up to the objective light of contrast and comparison with his predecessors. My detailed but abbreviated analysis proceeds by viewing “shards,” as it were, selected from a much larger project in preparation. For Fagles’s work to hand, we ask what are the gains and losses, what are the surprises, in a pulsing, cadenced, and carefully wrought literary achievement, hailed by the press as eloquent and visionary? I mean, how good is Fagles’s “performance”?

To test these compliments, I have consequently chosen just four Latin strands from Book IV and will analyze each translation briefly just to see what “justice” has been done to Virgil’s opportune masterpiece.

Let us begin with Virgil’s doomed widow, Dido, Queen of Carthage. “Shall a stranger give me the slampan? With such departure my royal seigneurie frumping?” (*Aeneid* 4.305–306). These immortal words, put into the mouth of the queen by Richard Stanyhurst some four hundred years ago, capture an Elizabethan essence of Virgil in English still respected by many today. Deploying jargon-filled language, Stanyhurst (1547–1618) thankfully translated only the first four books of the poem (Leiden, 1582). In the English-speaking world, Virgil’s *Aeneid* found a ready market; Stanyhurst is just one of a host of Anglo-Saxon “performers without a stage,” as Robert Wechsler calls translators.

In the original Latin, the queen’s words sting: “Dis similare etiam sperasti, perfide, tantum / posse nefas tacitusque mea decedere terra?” Here is the modern yeoman version by David West — “You traitor, did you imagine you could do this and keep it a secret? Did you think you could slip away from this land of mine and say nothing?” — pales by comparison. In a similar comparison of those bitter words, a plain 1993 Paris translation — “Perfide! Croire aussi me cacher un tel crime / Et quitter en secret une terre où je règne?” — contrasts sharply with a mid–nineteenth-century adaptation, as the heart-rending anger of Hector Berlioz’s Dido sears the very page: “Tu pars? tu pars? / Sans remords! / Programme du sceptre de Lybie / En m’arrêtant le coeur tu cours en Italie!” (You are going? Going? / Without compunction! / What? / Spurning the scepter of Libya / You tear my heart out and hurry away to Italy.)

How does Robert Fagles handle this? “So, you traitor, you really believed you’d keep this
a secret, this great outrage? Steal away in silence from my shores?” — captures much more than the too-succinct West, but Lombardo’s and McCrorie’s colloquial “sneak from” and “sneak away” improve upon Fairclough’s bland “pass from” (“steal from” for Goold), but is topped by Fitzgerald’s “slip away.” I prefer Dickinson’s imagistic “slink silently” or Day Lewis’s “skulk.” Copley replaces perfide with “You lied!” while Rhoades has “false heart,” Conington uses “perfidious wretch,” and Dryden expands with “base and ungrateful.”

In two earlier passages, equally emotional, Virgil sneers at and puns with the fated lovers (IV. 193–94): nunc hiemem inter se luxu, quam longa, fovere / regnorum immemores turpique cupidine captos. Fagles translates effectively the turpitude of Aeneas and Dido in their winter of contentment: “in obscene desire…, abject thralls of lust.” Lombardo and West have “slaves of lust,” and McCrorie “thralls of shameless desire,” while Fitzgerald abbreviates with “prisoners of lust,” or for French scholar Perret, “une honteuse passion.” Copley and Day Lewis rival Fagles with “ensnared by shameful lust” and “rapt in a trance of lust,” respectively. Mandelbaum overreaches, I think, with “slaves of squalid craving.” The passion is merely “unworthy / squalid craving” for the Victorian Conington, and Dryden misogynistically blames Dido with “abandoned to her lust” (emphasis supplied).

Some twenty-odd lines later comes the insulting prayer to Jove spoken by the miffed local chieftain Iarbas, which includes reference to Aeneas the Trojan as a “second Paris,” accompanied by a “troupe of eunuchs”: “et nunc ille Paris cum semiviro comitatu, / Maeonia mentum mitra crinemque madentem / subnexus […].” Fagles adapts quite well the sarcastic Latin with “his hair oozing oil, / a Phrygian bonnet tucked up under his chin….” Lombardo reduces that to “pomaded hair tied with ribbons,” and West expands the idea into “hair dripping with perfume,” drawing possibly on Fitzgerald’s “perfumed hair.” Perret’s “cheveux humides” puzzles, as does Dickinson with the too brief “crimped hair.” Mandelbaum (followed perhaps by Lombardo) has “greasy hair,” and Day Lewis uses “oil-sleeked hair set off by a Phrygian bonnet.” Humphries seems impatient or uninspired: “With millinery on his perfumed tresses,” and Fairclough, too cute with “essenced locks,” drew possibly on Conington’s “essenced hair.” Goold has revised the former with “perfumed locks bound with a Lydian turban” (but explains the Lydian turban’s featured ribbons in a footnote).

Dido’s effusive but deceptive words to her sister Anna refer to a priestess whom the Queen has supposedly engaged to help bewitch and/or delay the hero, or better, make Dido forget the man altogether (he is about to abandon her; IV. 483–86: hinc mihi Massylae gentis monstrata sacerdos, / Hesperidum templi custos, epulasque draconi / quae dabat et sacros servabat in arbore ramos, / spargens umida mella soporiferumque papaver). Fagles vividly depicts her words thus: “She’d [the priestess] safeguard the boughs in the sacred grove / and ply the dragon with morsels dripping loops / of oozing honey and poppies drowsy with slumber.” Lombardo’s version is a little more explicit: “She guarded the sanctuary of the Hesperides, protected the golden apples / on their tree, and feasted the dragon / on honey and the poppy’s drowsy opium” (but epulas merely means food or feast). McCrorie’s might raise queries from my undergraduates: “[the priestess] cares for Evening’s temple and offers her serpent / its meals, guarding the sacred boughs of an old tree, / sprinkling poppy seeds and honey at sleep—time.” Fitzgerald’s “drowsy poppy” is as unclear as Copley’s “with honey and poppy she made the elixir of sleep.” Dickinson’s “sleep-enlisting poppy” seems wide of the mark as well. Somewhere along the line, the “golden apples,” presumably derived from epulas, become lost (not found in Perret, Copley, Mandelbaum, Humphries, or Jackson Knight), though Rhodes and Fairclough have “dainties,” and Day Lewis perhaps explains how (following Dryden’s “She watch’d the golden
fruit”) the “dragon […] guarded their orchard of golden apples.”

From the exquisite elegance and gentleness of the Eclogues to the sometimes gloomy yet harmonious and finally triumphant Georgics, the genius of Virgil’s most ambitious undertaking was his epic poem of empire. Fagles’s excellent new interpretation reminds us how the Aeneid syncretizes and fuses ancient, contemporary, and portentous sources into three levels of Roman history, past, present, and future all interwoven into one seamless poetic dazzle. Nevertheless, as Theodore Ziolkowski remarks, “Virgil’s texts … became a mirror in which every reader found what he wished” (Virgil and the Moderns. Princeton, 1993, 27). Now that grim and bloody conflict, “Impious War” (Georgics I. 511), imperial and imperious pretensions enter our lives daily, the glorious grandeur and pious patriotism of Rome’s mission seem ever so timely and timeless. Yet this proceeds today in such a futile and tragic way for us.

Notes


6 Berlioz, Hector. Les Troyens: Oratorio in Five Acts [sound recording]. Holland: Philips, 1970 [reissued on 4 CDs, Hanover, Germany: Polygram, 1995 (?)]. Chorus and Orchestra of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden; Colin Davis, conductor. Program notes by Davis, David Cairns, and Erik Smith in English with French and German translations and libretto with English and German translations (100 pp.). Libretto by the composer after Virgil.

Works Cited


The Helen Lane Translation Fund, The Board of Directors, & Friends of Lumen, Inc.

announce the first

Writer in Translation Award to Diamaela Eltit

Lumen Books, publishers of Helen Lane Editions, announced today the first Writer in Translation Award to Diamaela Eltit (Santiago de Chile, 1949) for her exceptional productivity and persistence in what has been called a literature of resistance. While redefining the means, materials, and subject matter of literature, such non-conformist writing challenges a broad audience. Eltit states: “The part of me that writes is neither comfortable nor resigned and does not want readers who aren’t partners in a dialogue, accomplices in a certain nonconformity.” The Writer in Translation Award is an occasional award intended to recognize authors whose distinguished work appears in English translation but is not likely to bring them a recompense matching their achievement.

This new literary prize carries a cash award of $4000.

Lumen Books established Helen Lane Editions as a means of honoring the American translator’s accomplishment and tradition. The first book in the series is Diamaela Eltit’s *E. Luminata (Lumpérica)* translated by Ronald Christ. In their citation, the Directors, and Friends of Lumen declare that “While there are notable awards for translators and translations into English, such as the Kayden National Translation Award, which was granted to Diamaela Eltit’s *E. Luminata*, none of these also pays tribute to the originating author, and since the author is as little likely as the translator to receive appropriate recognition or compensation, we are founding the Writers in Translation Award.” “Translation,” they added, “is always an act of collaboration, whether or not the author actively participates.”

When Helen Lane was still living in the south of France, Diamaela Eltit visited her there. “She is light, pure light,” Helen wrote, “shining, radiant in dark corners.”

Diamaela Eltit has been translated into French and Finnish. Her works in English translation include:


The Writer in Translation Award is determined solely by the Board of Directors and Friends of Lumen, Inc. Please do not send applications or nominations.

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TRANSLATING MENTAL IMAGES AND SOCIOCULTURAL MODELS IN PLURILINGUAL DISCOURSE: EXAMPLES FROM TRANSLATIONS OF POSTCOLONIAL LITERARY TEXTS IN PORTUGUESE

By Rebeca Hernández

Plurilingualism is one of the most distinctive and linguistically defining traits of postcolonial societies and a major feature of postcolonial literature. In the type of postcolonial literary discourse in which the base is a European language, plurilingualism is used in different ways: it may function as a means of personal and national affirmation, as a new code that would hide the meaning of words from the “official” world, or as an artistic device employed by authors to represent the social complexities of an unequally layered multicultural reality (cf. Ferreira 1977). Plurilingualism may adopt various forms of linguistic hybridity. It may involve, for example, the straightforward switching of codes or the direct insertion in the main language of autochthonous words, together with other more sophisticated techniques such as nativization or africanization, to use the terms coined by Chinua Achebe and S.N. Shridhar, respectively, when they refer to the different degrees of phonetic, lexical, or grammatical pidginization that may be imposed on the imperial language, usually with a subversive vindicating sense of both differentiation and identity construction. Zabus (1991) talks about the linguistic phenomena at work in postcolonial writings as “rellexification” and applies the expression to that sort of recreating re-coding practice that occurs whenever a postcolonial writer infuses his/her Europhone text with the rhythm, lexis, structures, and/or pragmatic uses typical of the underlying national speech.

Translating the multilingualism of postcolonial literature into another language places the translator at a crossroads, which basically implies either opting for a multilingual translation faithful to the built-in characteristics of the original or choosing fluent monolinguality in the target language as a means to ease the communicative interaction between text and readers and, as a side but in no sense minor effect, the commercial transaction between the interchanging cultural forces. Like many other theoreticians (Berman 1984, 1999; Spivak 1993, 1995; Lefevere 1999; Lambert 1999; Chesterman 2000), Venuti evaluates the consequences of this critical decision from an ethical perspective. He considers that a “fluent translation may enable a foreign text to engage a mass readership, even a text from an excluded foreign literature, and thereby initiate a significant canon reformation.” But he remarks as well that “such a translation simultaneously reinforces the major language and its many other linguistic and cultural exclusions while masking the inscription of domestic values” (1998: 12). Thus, obviating the plurilingualism of postcolonial texts for the sake of fluency in the target language (which invariably seeks a favorable response in the prospective reader of the receiving culture) ends up strengthening, as Ribeiro says, “the logic of empire, that of an all-encompassing centre governed by the goal of total assimilation,” which happens to be, like assimilationist translations, “essentially monolingual and monologic” (2004: 2). Venuti argues that “fluency is assimilationist” because it presents “to domestic readers a realistic representation with their own codes and ideologies as if it were an immediate encounter with a foreign text and culture” (1998: 12).

As a measure to avoid the homogenizing effect that the so-called search for fluency invariably conveys, Spivak supports weaving
into the translation process all the realities (linguistic, social, biographical) that intervene in the literary creation. She contends that “the history of the language, the history of the author’s moment, the history of the language in-and-as-translation” should play a role in the unloading of the original text onto another language (Spivak 1993: 186) and denounces the standardization of voices in translation as a way to obliterate identity in favor of mass regularity:

In the act of wholesale translation into [English] there can be a betrayal of the democratic ideal into the law of the strongest. This happens when all the literature in the Third World gets translated into a sort of with-it translatese, so that the literature by a woman in Palestine begins to resemble, in the feel of its prose, something by a man in Taiwan.

(Spivak 1993: 182)

Spivak associates the multiplicity of languages, voices, and tones with the maintainance of “ethical singularity” and states that “ethical action” favors and encourages “responses from both sides,” an option that she surely considers more equitable than homogenization even if this is practised in the name of “common sense” (Spivak 1995: xxiv–xxv).

Adopting an ethical position during the process of translation also means that the translator acquires some sort of commitment toward the reality represented in the text, a reality that is multicultural and plurilingual in postcolonial texts and usually worlds apart from the so-called “universal” cultural patterns, which, as Santos (2003: 38) remarks, tend to mirror those followed by Western tradition and thought. Translating the world depicted in postcolonial discourse into a new linguistic medium entails conveying to the reader a given image or a given model of the plural and distinct reality it represents. Choosing monolinguality as a vehicle often implies renouncing the passing on off-core aspects of the original texts in a straightforward way and imposes a series of limitations that may have as a first immediate consequence the transformation of the world recreated into a totally dissimilar, and probably domesticated, reality.

Furthermore, the decisions made during the translation process with regard to the plurilingualism of a given text do not only affect its fluency, its readability, or the preservation of its identity. They also affect the configuration of images and social constructs projected by that text onto the readers’ minds during the reception and interpretation processes, most of all because those elements, lexical or otherwise, that the writer chooses to insert from the national language are a means to represent the more local and evocative aspects of his/her reality, precisely those that are less familiar to the average non-native reader. To show the extent to which the impression produced by a text may vary depending on the maintainance or suppression of its plurilingualism in the translated version, we will consider a poem entitled Carta de Um Contratado by the Angolan poet António Jacinto, and the translation of this poem into English included in The Penguin Book of Modern African Poetry. As can be seen in the lines quoted below, the original poem, written in Portuguese, introduces certain words and expressions in Kimbundu, the national language of Angola (here italicized). These words serve to anchor the poem in the hybrid reality characteristic of African colonized societies; the translator has chosen instead not to keep the original words in the national language and translates all terms into English:

1. dos teus lábios vermelhos como tacula
dos teus cabelos negros como dilóa
dos teus olhos doces como macongue

2. of your lips red as henna
 of your hair black as mud
 of your eyes sweet as honey

The presence of three autochthonous words in such a short fragment of the original poem exemplifies the role played by these elements during the reading process: they function as an
economical and efficient way to help the reader in the construction of a mental representation or model that includes the African reality, and this is done through the activation of images contextually framed by the native tongue. In the translation, however, monolingualism is chosen, and the native terms disappear. This decision certainly facilitates fluency by making the reader experience a composition that is closer to his/her own reality, but it brings about some probably unsought consequences that go beyond what might be considered a certain loss of authenticity. The absence of African words actually erases all traces of the Angolan reality from the English translation of the poem and eliminates the need to open new mental spaces for the culturally bound elements represented in the stanza by the native words. The change of effect in the reception and interpretation processes can be appreciated if we recover the Kimbundu words for the English translation. The presence of the African world is automatically restored, and so is the need to establish a parallel cognitive framework:

- of your lips red as **tacula**
- of your hair black as **dilôa**
- of your eyes sweet as **macongue**

The objection might be that the occurrence of words unknown to the target reader would feel like impediments when reading the translated poem. In this way, the pragmatic effect of hybridity as an indicator of sociocultural differences is preserved, and the mental construction built on the basis of a plurilingual translation approaches the mental model projected by the plurilingual original, in our case, in Portuguese.

Authors are sensitive to these challenging situations in the translations of their works. Brazilian writer Jorge Amado, talking about the hybrid Afro-Latin Bahianês (from Bahia), confesses that the only translations he really enjoys are those he cannot read. He expresses his admiration toward the editions of his books in Vietnamese, Chinese, Norwegian, or Guarani, which appear to him as enigmatic and precious, but talks ironically about those translations of his work into languages he understands, like Spanish or French, for they allow him to see how sometimes what he considers magic words are deprived of their distinctive emotional load. To illustrate his point, he mentions, for example, those translations into Spanish that convert words as expressive as “**bunda**” into “**nalgas,**” a highly aseptic term that is poles apart from the idea triggered by “**bunda,**” in Amado’s own words, something approximating “**culo de mulata que se precie**” (1995: 25).

Some classic linguistic theoreticians, like Sapir or Whorf, favored the idea that “a man’s language molds his perception of reality” (cf. Sampson 1980: 81). This strong association between language and its sociocultural background is at the basis of Sapir’s remark when he stated that “no two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality” and that “the worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached” (in Sampson: 1980: 82–83). The fact that both Sapir and Whorf studied indigenous languages (Sapir was an anthropologist specialized in the languages of the Pacific coast of North America, and Whorf analyzed in detail certain American Indian languages) may not be irrelevant to their perception of language as a shaper of reality, for the distance between nations, cultures, peoples, and societies stresses the importance that the words, the expressions, or the rhythms of a language have in the naming of things and experiences and in the construction of identity.

More recent approaches to language and to linguistic processes, such as the psycholinguistic theory of mental models (cf. Johnson-Laird 1983, 1988; van Dijk and Kintsch 1983; Garnham 1987; van Dijk 1997) or the cognitive theory of mental spaces (Fauconnier 1985, 1988, 1997; Fauconnier and Sweetser 1996; Fauconnier and Turner 2002), contend that the participants in any type of linguistic interaction construct a mental representation of a given fact, action, situation,
or reality while processing discourse and that this is done on the basis of linguistic expressions, previous world or experiential knowledge, socially shared beliefs, idiosyncratic attitudes, and the imagination. The theory of mental spaces also says that “as we think and talk, mental spaces are set up, structured and linked under pressure from grammar, context and culture” (Fauconnier and Swetser 1996: 11). Therefore, and according to both theories, interpreting complex discourse involves creating a network of interrelated spaces or mental constructions that act as correlates of the personal or sociocultural reality contained in the text. These construed mental spaces or models incorporate frames and individual or collective conceptualizations and “fit into cognitive models that are imported from background knowledge” (Fauconnier and Swetser 1996: 11). Fauconnier says that “language has many resources to guide the construction and connection of mental spaces” (1997: 40) and cites as triggering devices lexical items and grammatical structures such as names and noun phrases, prepositional phrases, adverbials, subject-verb complexes, etc. Fauconnier and Swetser remark that the mental spaces built on the basis of linguistic information “may or may not have external referents,” but regardless of this fact, “spaces are linked to the world by the presumption that ‘real’ situations can be matched with space configurations by humans in systematic ways” (1996: 11).

Seen from this cognitive perspective, and taking as reference the case studied here, the presence of an African term in a Europhone text serves the reader as an indirect but clear indication to construct or activate a frame of knowledge that should incorporate aspects from the African reality. Suppressing the African words or expressions that make the original text plurilingual in the translation into another language cancels the effect of these words as symbols of a distinct, contextually bound reality for which new mental spaces should be built or created. Opting for monolinguality implies substituting the specific domain, which the autochthonous term should help to open or create in the receiver’s mind, with an already existing familiar frame coming from the reader’s own world and culture. Thus, decisive marks in the original are neutralized, and the effect is homogenization, as denounced by Venuti, Ribeiro, and Spivak above.

A good example of how the assimilationist tendency can be fought when translating the plurilingualism of postcolonial literary discourse by preserving the original display of images and sociocultural models is found in Margaret Jull Costa’s translation into English of Crónica de Uma Travessia, a novel by writer Luís Cardoso from Timor. In her version of this work, titled in English The Crossing, Costa uses what could be considered “subversive” practices of translation as she chooses to integrate, in her text in English, words and expressions from the national languages of Timor, and occasionally from Portuguese, which is the base language of the original, thus subverting hegemonic values. Cardoso’s text in Portuguese includes many expressions in tétum (the language of Timor), which are explained to the reader in numerous footnotes. In her translation, Costa does not make an extensive use of footnotes, but words in tétum are kept and listed in a glossary at the end of the book, and footnotes are reserved primarily to explain cultural aspects. To facilitate the comprehension and interpretation processes, Costa frequently introduces, in a natural and rather imperceptible way, intratextual glosses that in fact work as instructions for the foreign reader, who is able to build a mental representation of the situation described taking into account those local and sociocultural aspects that might be unknown to him/her.

To illustrate our point, we will consider a few cases from Cardoso’s book and the decisions made by Costa in her translation. In the first example, as has been noted above, national words are kept and explained through paraphrasing or intratextual glosses (here highlighted in bold). First, we cite the excerpt in Portuguese and the corresponding footnotes,
then Costa’s translation into English, followed by the definitions of the terms included in the glossary:

1. mas o local estava diferente, os seus habitantes desaparecidos e as casas todas pintadas de branco e ocupadas por malaes (1) que não sabiam falar mambae (2).
   (1) Estrangeiro branco (português).
   (2) Uma das línguas timorenses.
   (Costa 1997: 12, italics in the original)
2. but the place looked different now — its inhabitants had disappeared and the houses were all painted white and occupied by Portuguese people, malaes, who couldn’t speak Mambae.
   Glossary:
   malaes — a foreigner.
   mambae — the language spoken by the Mambae, one of the poorest hill peoples in East Timor. (Translation by Costa 2000: 2, italics in the translation)

Now we will see how Costa uses a similar strategy of intratextual paraphrasing to introduce and explain sociopolitical and cultural information (also highlighted in bold):

1. Era membro da UDT e defensor convicto do mate-bandera-hum (3).
   Como tal foi preso pela FREITILIN durante a guerra civil […]
   (3) Expressão em tétum: morrer à sombra da bandeira (portuguesa).
   (Cardoso 1997: 12, italics in the original)
2. He was a member of the UDT (Timorese Democratic Union) and a committed defender of mate-bandera-hum, a Tetum expression meaning “to die in the shadow of the Portuguese flag.” As such, he was imprisoned by Fretilin (Revolutionary Front of Independent East Timor) during the civil war […]
   Glossary:
   Fretilin — Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor; in favor of a completely independent nation of East Timor.
   mate-bandera-hum — literally, “to die in the shadow of the Portuguese flag”; the slogan of the pro-Portuguese UDT.
   UDT — Timorese Democratic Union; in favor of retaining old colonial links with Portugal. (Translation by Costa 2000: 2, italics in the translation)

The following passage shows how, in the original, the author integrates Portuguese and one of the national languages of Timor by juxtaposition of two terms: “burro” and “kuda.” The English translation maintains this combination and explains the meaning with intratextual glosses (here in bold).

2. Next door to us, Master Jaime turned his classroom into a torture chamber. […] He denounced his students for being as stupid as kuda-burros, not that anyone knew what that was. Being a kuda (horse), it certainly had four legs, but the rebellious student could only guess at the meaning of burro or “donkey.” Only much later did I actually see an example of this
beast in a market in Lisbon. It bore no resemblance to the students at Soibada or even to Master Jaime. (Translation by Costa 2000: 41–42, italics in the translation)

There are other cases of cultural translation in Costa’s version of Cardoso’s *Crónica de Uma Travessia*, as in the following excerpt, in which “José Alexandre Gusmão” is identified for the English reader as the figure of activist “Xanana Gusmão” with details about his political importance.

1. Havia o José Alexandre Gusmão, guarda-redes, um ex-seminarista que escrevia sonetos e criava frangos na baliza. (Cardoso 1997: 64)

2. They also had José Alexandre Gusmão, goalkeeper and exseminarian, who was too busy making up sonnets to actually stop any goals*.

*as Xamana [sic] Gusmão, he became the guerrilla leader of the independence movement in Timor. (Translation by Costa 2000: 58)

But cultural translation is not practiced exclusively with information about Timor, its people, and its background. The same happens with some aspects representative of the Portuguese culture; such is the case in the following example (highlighted in bold), where Amália Rodrigues is explicitly acknowledged as the famous singer of *fados*:

1. Na rádio ouvia-se Amália, até que ela um dia decidiu viajar até Timor e cantar para os Timorenses, que não puderam ver o rosto do fado nos momentos da dor e da saudade. (Cardoso 1997: 90)

2. We had only ever heard Amália, the voice of fado, on the radio until one day she decided to come to Timor and sing to the Timorese people — not that we ever actually got a chance to see the sad, yearning face of fado.

Glossary:

*fado* — a traditional Portuguese song form, usually full of yearning for what has been lost. (Translation by Costa 2000: 86, italics in the translation)

The last case we will discuss illustrates how Costa also uses translation strategies to insert explanatory intratextual glosses in the text. For example, she juxtaposes expressions in the source and target languages to enlarge the English readers’ knowledge domain with information about Cardoso’s country and background. In this manner, the information received acquires a double anchoring dimension that permits a certain degree of assimilation without risking any loss of identity or idiosyncratic difference. To achieve this effect, the expression in the original language is kept as a means to connect with the reality represented, that of Timor, while the translation serves to bridge the gap for the reader between both worlds and cultures. This happens, for example, when Costa decides to keep the title of the fado in Portuguese and then translates it into English, or when she reproduces the final utterance in a national language and adds the English translation as a sequel. In a similar way, she adds an extensive intratextual annotation or gloss as part of her own discourse to explain the meaning of *Loro Monu* and *Loro Sae* (all three cases highlighted in bold). To complete and facilitate the process of mutual understanding, Costa also includes all instances from the Timor languages in the glossary at the end of the book.

1. Ele enchia o peito de ar para largar sopros pela garganta que saíam da sua boca como uma cascata, entoando o povo que lavas no rio. Imaginei então que teria de ser um rio do tamanho do mar e ainda não sabia que o Tejo entrava pela cidade dentro. E de tempos em tempos saíam da sua doca, jovens mais
esbranquiçados que sumaúma, que o navio “Timor” descarregava no cais de Dili e recolhia outros, [...] deixando em terra aquelas minhas conterrâneas abatidas de Loro Monu e Loro Sae (1),[...] vestidas à pressa de minissaia desajeitada, para irem ouvir o canto da sereia no cais: — *Malae bá ona* (2)!

1. Loro Monu, pôr do Sol; Loro Sae, nascer do Sol.
2. O estrangeiro vai-se embora.

(Cardoso 1997: 91, italics in the original)

2. [He] used to fill his lungs with air and then release it in long exhalations, the words pouring from his mouth like a cascade — “*Povo que lavas no rio,*” “People of Portugal, you who wash in the river.” At the time, unaware that the Tagus flowed right through Lisbon, I thought that such a river would have to be the size of the sea. From time to time, young men as pale as kapok would leave the Lisbon docks on the *Timor* and deposited on quayside at Dili, where the ship would pick up others, [...] leaving behind them my downcast female compatriots from both halves of the country — Loro Monu *in the west* and Loro Sae *in the east* — who had dressed hurriedly in awkward miniskirts, in order to hear the song of the siren on the quayside: *Malae bá ona!*

**The foreigner is leaving.**

Glossary:

*Loro Monu* — “where the sun sets”; used to describe the western half of East Timor.

*Loro Sae* — “where the sun rises”; the eastern half of East Timor.

*Malae bá ona* — “the foreigner is leaving.” (Translation by Costa 2000: 86–87, italics in the translation)

The techniques employed by Costa not only show an ethical commitment on the part of the translator toward the original text and its sociocultural environment but also help to recreate the real atmosphere for the English reader, without diminishing his/her capacity to understand the text fully. Costa’s translation engages in a dialogue between the language of the translated text and the fusion of languages and cultures of the original, thus widening the horizon of reception and articulating a universe that encourages mutual recognition and awareness of the other.

The examples studied so far have presented primarily cases of lexical or phrasal insertions from the national languages (of Angola and Timor) into Portuguese, the European language that forms the basis of the texts under consideration. In such a situation, the main issue for the translator consists of deciding whether to reflect the plurilingualism of postcolonial discourse by keeping the national expressions (and finding alternate ways of putting them in the clear for the target reader, such as intratextual glosses, footnotes, glossaries, etc.) or to convert the whole text into a monolingual whole with no marks of its original plurilingual quality. There are, however, other postcolonial texts whose translation involves decisions of a more complex kind, especially when the linguistic hybridity of the discourse affects the phonic or syntactic nature of the text. An example of a highly complex blend of languages is Luis Bernardo Honwana’s short story “Rosita, até morrer.”

As opposed to the normal literary practice that characterizes other works by this Mozambican author, “Rosita, até morrer” is not written in normative Portuguese but rather in a pidginized version of Portuguese that incorporates syntactic structures and intonation patterns from several Bantu languages, as well as lexical items in Ronga. Once again, the signs of phonological, morphological, lexical, and syntactic hybridity in the language of the story are neither unintended nor irrelevant, for they actively serve as indicators of the reality
they help to recreate and are used by readers to construct an accurate and realistic mental representation of the character’s condition, of her cultural background, and of the politically and socially tinted quality of her oral discourse and illiteracy. A monolingual translation of these plurilingual traits would succeed in turning the plot into a fluent and readable story, canonically “universal,” in the sense given to the term by Santos (2003) and mentioned above; but it would automatically remove all traces of its contextual substance and literary depth. The image constructed by the reader on the basis of a normative monolingual translation would fail to project the real circumstances of the hybrid situation of postcolonial societies, the tensions and struggle of their social inequalities, their sense of identity, and the intrinsic and defining properties of their literature. All these factors get reflected in a highly economical and effective way in the apparently distorting fusion of cultures and languages that is a distinctive feature of postcolonial literary discourse.

There is a translation into English of “Rosita, até morrer” by Richard Bartlett. It was done in collaboration with the author, Luís Bernardo Honwana, and published in 2000 as part of a collection of African stories edited by Stephen Gray. Bartlett’s translation is faithful to the merging of languages in the original text, for it takes into account the phonological and syntactic alterations of the original and creatively translates them into English. There is high elaboration at all levels of language, as can be seen in the brief excerpt quoted below. As usual, we cite the example from the original first and the translation second:

1. Tu que não presta: tu gosta mulherçimilado que draba você. (2000: 173)
2. You who dont care: you like ssimilado woman who dumps you (Translation by Bartlett 2000: 201)

For these cases of heavy pidginization, some translators of postcolonial plurilingual literature prefer choosing one of the corresponding pidginized variants of the target language for their translation. Such was the decision taken, for example, by Gasana Ndoba, the translator into French of Honwana’s major work, Nós Matámos o Cão-Tinhoso (published in French as Nous avons tué le Chien-Teigneux in 1983), who in his foreword explains how he translated what he describes as the elementary Portuguese of black speakers by a corresponding pidgin of colonial French known as “le petit-nègre.” From that pidgin, he borrowed the characteristic phonetic and morphological patterns as well as other grammatical alterations such as confusion of genre, number, verbal inflections and tenses, omission of articles, etc. Although this may seem a good compromising decision, it poses problems when the construction of mental images and social models is once more considered. From an ethical perspective, using the standard pidginized language of a different culture and society introduces yet another sort of foreignization in the translation process as it projects onto the translated text the roles and models of a society that is neither that of the source text nor that of the target. From a cognitive perspective, this option involves creating and/or recreating (especially for those readers who might be familiarized with the pidgin used as target language) inaccurate mental images and mental models, as they would be built on the basis of a discourse whose social and linguistic referent does not correspond to the reality portrayed in the original.

In this sense, we consider that, by emphasizing the idiosyncratic and non-identical, Costa’s culturally conscious and dialogical translation and Bartlett’s creative decomposition of the target language offer better, more efficient, and more respectful tools to reconstruct the true sense of identity that is at the basis of plurilingualism. Our standpoint assumes that preserving the plurilingualism of postcolonial texts in their translations into other languages is not only a question of language selection or fluency.

Translation Review
Besides the ethical stand that is traditional in the literature, there is also the need in translation to guide readers into opening new mental spaces, where the images, models and frames put forward by the original and representative of the other culture can be located. As Costa’s and Bartlett’s translations demonstrate, the maintenance of autochthonous terms, expressions, hybrid features of language, and the insertion of explanatory intratextual glosses prove efficient linguistic means to perform this cognitive and sociocultural function.

Works Cited


BOOK REVIEWS


Mark Francis, Reviewer

There is no gainsaying that this edition makes for an attractive book. Designed as an elegant trade paperback, graced through its middle by a widescreen reproduction of a thirteenth century landscape painting above which “Wang Wei” runs in parchment-yellow Palatino lettering, this volume should hold its own among the coffee-table crowd. The inside offers no less of a high-value production: quality paper; more handsome typefaces; and great swaths of blank space between and within the poems (a visual pun perhaps on the Chinese poet’s constant iteration of “Emptiness”?).

Still, one wonders naturally what *The Selected Poems of Wang Wei* and their translation into English by David Hinton might offer beyond fine packaging. As the back cover explains, Wang Wei “is often spoken of, with his contemporaries Li Po and Tu Fu, as one of the three greatest poets in China’s 3,000-year poetic tradition.” Yet the book as a whole makes no mention of the fact that during his own age, the High Tang dynasty (713–766), Wang Wei was typically considered to be the greatest Chinese poet; or of the fact that the supreme reputations of Li Bo (sic) and particularly Du Fu (ditto), along with Wang Wei’s concurrent diminishment, were later developments that took place during a post-aristocratic epoch; or of how and why these literary judgments occurred.

Granting Mr. Hinton the obvious point that his work is not intended as scholarship and addressing it solely as a contribution of poetry, one reader at least cannot avoid the impolitic question, exactly what as a translator is he trying to do? The bibliography cites several available existing translations, two of them within the frame of important studies, and so indicates that Mr. Hinton has done his homework regarding forebears and the competition. What, then, justifies these new versions? Not to be too facetious, but what apparently justifies them is that they are by David Hinton.

To scrutinize the editorial comments further is to learn as much about David Hinton as about Wang Wei: Hinton’s “many translations have earned wide acclaim for recreating the classical tradition as compelling contemporary poetry. His many honors include a Guggenheim Fellowship and the Landon Translation Award …”; and “Mr. Hinton has established himself as the premier Chinese translator of our generation.” The last comment is presumably linked with another, the claim that “in Hinton’s masterful translations he sounds utterly contemporary.”

Should an eighth-century, aristocratic Chinese poet, who was steeped in a two-thousand-year old, complex literary tradition imbued with Buddho-Daoist thought and who wrote in rhymed formal structures in alternately courtly and more colloquial modes, sound so familiarly modern? Wang Wei’s style has been aptly characterized as an “artifice of simplicity.” The phrasings in the following pseudo-couplets may strike some as “utterly contemporary” and others perhaps not so much as contemporary but as contrived and confused; regardless, the translations are most unlike the smooth, simple, end-stopped lines of Wang Wei’s originals:

- Shifting kingfisher-greens flash radiant scatters. Evening mists: nowhere they are. (p. 41)

- Far shores: I see villagers there beyond knowing in all this distance, distance. (44)

- In these forest depths no one knows this moon come bathing me in light. (49)

- At home beside this stream, quiet, no one
here. Scattered. Scattered open and falling. (50)

One of the old supposed guidelines to translation is to imagine how an author would write in the target language, but it is hard indeed to imagine how Wang Wei would choose to adopt an ungrammatical, cobbled idiom when he is precisely the opposite in Chinese. This observation fails to mention that some of Hinton’s translations are plainly significant distortions of the sense of their sources. “Far shores…beyond knowing in all this distance, distance,” for instance, (from the poem “South Point”) runs rather in the Chinese, “Across the shore gazing at people’s homes. / Far, far; unknown to each other.” The fourth example listed above (from the quatrain “Magnolia Slope”) reads in the original, “A dwelling by the stream is silent, unpeopled. / One by one they open and fall.” Whereas Hinton tries to force or heighten dramatically ellipses, ambiguities, and reduplications, Wang Wei employs them quietly but deftly as seamless features or opportunities of the standard classical Chinese language.

It may be true that at their extremes classical Chinese and modern English are incompatible linguistic species and that Wang Wei’s compositions are like fine tissues of sensory impression and philosophical suggestion whose contours tend to fray and disappear when imported to another tongue and civilization. If so, then this incompatibility may explain the numerous and varied attempts to translate these poems into modern English. *Nineteen Ways of Looking at Wang Wei*, the classic work edited by Eliot Weinberger and Octavio Paz, considers a single quatrain in multiple English as well as French and Spanish versions and may therefore compactly provide evidence of this very problem of transference.

Nevertheless, it still seems curious that Hinton’s versions both stand very far from their avowed roots in form, diction, tone, and implication and yet receive such commendation and prominence. His own version of the quatrain of *Nineteen Ways*, “Deer Park” (40), is a case in point. In typical Hinton fashion, the translation relies on descriptive adhesions not to be found among the original twenty Chinese syllables: “hints…drifting… no more”; an embellished substitute for a mild generic verb in the case of the use of “flares” for “shines”; and the calculated use of a full verb in place of a preposition in the case of the use of “rises” instead of “on.” In the last instance, Hinton is similar to Gary Snyder in assigning special signification and significance to the directional, insisting on rewriting a filler rhyme-word (“on”) as an ascending motion (“rises”). It seems to me that this decision was made out of a conscious or unconscious Eurocentric association of high/Heavenly/light/enlightenment, which completely misses the immanentist ambience of the Buddhist religion and ignores Wang Wei’s subtlety. Aside from that choice, however, Snyder’s rendering remains very close to the original Chinese.

The result is arguably poetry, but it is hardly Wang Wei. It is true that in the practice of translation there exist opposite poles of the more faithful and the more creative approaches; it is also true that the writing and indeed the marketing of a translation are usually undertaken deliberately from a position within one of these two camps. Furthermore, the distance between classical Chinese culture and literature on the one hand and the American profession of poetry on the other is fairly great. Still, does this gap legitimize transforming these works, the products of one of the most venerated masters of a great tradition, into a kind of verbal chinoiserie whose qualities may be determined more by the inclinations of naïve consumers than by the alleged native inspiration of the works themselves?

If so, then author and reader alike might as well admit to themselves and aloud that rendering a speaking likeness of the Other is a passé project wholly superseded by the need to find grist for the individualist mill. Editors, then, ought to avoid the word *translation* altogether. Yet, after all, this edition is entitled *The Selected Poems of Wang Wei* and
“Translated by David Hinton” is prominently displayed. The edition is not entitled More Nature Poems by David Hinton, (Somewhat) Suggested by Wang Wei.


Terje Saar-Hambazaza, Reviewer

Jüri Talvet’s A Call for Cultural Symbiosis: Meditations from U is an essay of short meditations translated from the Estonian language by the renowned American poet and academic Harvey L. Hix, who collaborated with Talvet on an English translation of contemporary Estonian poetry entitled On the Way Home. Jüri Talvet, the Chair of Comparative Literature and a professor of Spanish literature at the University of Tartu in Estonia, is one of Estonia’s leading thinkers in the field of arts and humanities. In addition to his academic and scholarly endeavors, Talvet has earned praise for his work as a poet, essayist, translator, and editor. He is the founder of the literary journal Interlitteraria (published in Estonia) and has played a significant role in introducing Spanish and Latin-American literature to Estonian audiences as well as in presenting Estonian literature to international audiences. He has translated into Estonian works by Mario Vargas Llosa, Gabriel García Márquez, José Emilio Pacheco, Sergio Pitol, Salvador Espriu, and others. Talvet’s own creative writing and scholarly essays have been published in various countries around the world, with many of his scholarly essays dealing with issues related to the literatures of Spain, Catalan, Mexico, Cuba, Nicaragua, and other countries.

The essay Sümbiootiline kultuur (A Call for Cultural Symbiosis) was widely acclaimed in Estonian literary circles for its non-conformist and idealistic look at the present and future state of arts and humanities. Even though the book did not win the national literary prize for non-fiction in 2005, it was considered one of the frontrunners for its contemporary sensibility and thought. The meditations found in the essay were written between 1997 and 2002. The work itself is divided into eighteen sections that deal with a specific topic related to the essay’s main themes: violence; the progress of the modern world; language; poetry; music; theater; race; philosophy; the natural sciences; and existentialism. Many of these meditations were written while Talvet was traveling to and examining the life and culture of various countries, including the U.S., Canada, Mexico, Cuba, Spain, Norway, and his homeland, Estonia. These reflections draw upon Talvet’s experiences as a lifelong observer and student of foreign cultures and peoples. As a result, each section (and thus the essay as a whole) presents both personal and philosophical thoughts, an approach that conveys to the reader a sense of the author’s candid and introspective approach to the specific subject matter and overall themes. As the title indicates, A Call for Cultural Symbiosis is primarily interested in stressing the idea of cultural symbiosis. It is a call for multiculturalism, where each contributor has an equally important part to play in affecting others’ behavior and knowledge. Talvet believes that in order to fight cultural imperialism, we need to create a symbiosis of both the dominant as well as the peripheral cultures of the world. According to him, both large and small countries/nations and their languages “contribute to the process of inquiring into the meaning of our life” (8). It is necessary, therefore, for the world to continue with and expand the scope of the exchange of ideas through works of literature, theater, and music performances but also cartoons and books written for children. A dialogue (in the broadest sense) between equals, rather than between dominant cultures and cultures situated on the periphery, is the only way that multiculturalism is possible.
Talvet creates very specific symbolic images and symbiotic signs in his approach to the subject matter. At the beginning of the essay, the author constructs a symbolic world based on countries called U, Z, and ZZ. Country U represents the writer’s own homeland, a small, ex-Communist country that became independent after World War I but was then annexed by a foreign power, Z, before regaining its independence in the early-1990s. While the author does not mention the real name of the country U, it is clear from the cultural references and historical allusions that U stands for Estonia. The experiences of U, however, can be applied to other former Soviet countries such as Latvia, for example, or to the satellite nations of the Soviet Union in Eastern Europe; this application reveals how similar the experiences and sufferings of these countries were. Z as a country is more ambiguous in Talvet’s analysis. At times, it refers to the Soviet Union with its communist agenda. Yet sometimes the meaning seems to be carried over to Russia, especially when speaking of Russian culture. Still, there are also occasions elsewhere when the name “Russia” appears without its symbolic sign, Z. Talvet uses similarly both ZZ as well as the word “Germany” to indicate Germany as a country.

It is interesting to note that in the Estonian alphabet, the letter Z is considered non-Estonian and appears only in foreign words, while U (as stated by Talvet) is one of the important vowels that appears in many fundamental words in the Estonian language: surm “death”; tuli “fire”; kurbus “sadness”; jumal “God”; luule “poetry”; and uni “sleep” (7). Only at the end of the essay does the author fully reveal the letter U’s connection to Eesti, the Estonian word for “Estonia” (that is left in Hix’s translation in the original).

In the other sections of the book, Talvet is less symbolic in his imagery and meditations. The author displays instead his mindful and concerned attitude toward humanity and his fear of the loss of the compassionate, humane qualities of life. Here his words clearly communicate with not just Estonian but also American readers. Talvet’s ongoing call for cultural symbiosis includes an invitation to larger nations, including the U.S, to learn more languages and become more interested in smaller, peripheral, minority cultures. He is never shy about his negative feelings toward the violence in Hollywood films or about the problems arising from a society’s excessive pursuit of wealth and prosperity. Simultaneously, Talvet attempts to find positive aspects of living on the cultural periphery or even under a communist regime, recalling, for example, his own personal experiences of the importance of reading or the positive attitude of Eastern Europeans toward theater and music; even poor families in Estonia had the opportunity to send their children to study a musical instrument during the Soviet occupation. Since “border” states are more dialogical in their way of communicating — often its citizens know more languages than a person coming from a larger country — the peripheral nations can overcome their fear of the “other” and avoid falling into the trap of cultural imperialism more easily than other, larger countries. According to Talvet, minority cultures can thus use this tendency to change cultural values in the global arena. We can avoid cultural as well as linguistic imperialism by accepting the significance and enthusiasm of peripheral cultures and find more ways to interact with smaller nations. The author’s meditations on the present and future role of philosophy, existentialism, and the natural sciences are especially interesting in this context. In all of these cases, Talvet concludes that ultimately a symbiosis of thoughts and approaches is needed. For example, in philosophy, he calls for a symbiotic philosophy that combines arts and literature and values both the form and content of a work. In the section on physicists and poets, the coexistence of humanists and natural scientists becomes necessary, inevitable, and even sought after.

A translator of any language is always faced with problems related to cultural idiosyncrasies and unfamiliar situations. A translator who is mediating Estonian culture
and sensibilities to English-speaking audiences has, therefore, several issues to deal with. First, there will be linguistic challenges that are related to the Estonian language’s somewhat relaxed sentence structure. Second, there will be cultural problems connected to references to Estonia’s history and culture that cannot be grasped immediately. On the linguistic level, H.L. Hix’s translation of Talvet’s *A Call for Cultural Symbiosis* is noteworthy for the way it occasionally maintains the sentence structure of the Estonian. By doing so, the translation offers a reading experience in some ways similar to the one that Estonian-speaking readers have. Consider, for example the following two sentences: “During the first weeks of my stay in California I had the feeling that I could not get from anywhere regular and consequent news coverage of what was going on in the world, as we are accustomed to in U and Europe, in general” (28); “For instance, differently from U the Scandinavian countries have felt in the last great trial of the twentieth century the dark threat coming from the West (South), rather than from the East, which explains why much more than in U the way of thinking of the Scandinavians is based on ideas of social justice (that is, socialism)” (30). In Hix’s translation, Talvet’s original text is clearly not fully “domesticated” for English-speaking readers. Instead, the translation recreates to an extent the original work’s linguistic sensibility.

In the case of specific cultural references, e.g., newspaper and journal titles, Hix has skillfully managed to retain the sense of foreignness in the translated text by including within the text explanations of these references. At the same time, he is also successful in conveying a sense of the innovation and originality of Talvet’s text, as, for example, when translating the Estonian author’s references to the state of modern philosophy as “filosofoloogia” or “philosophology.” Hix should also be commended for leaving at the end of the essay the original word “Eesti” instead of translating it into English as “Estonia.” The translator’s decision here illustrates Talvet’s idea about minority cultures creating a dialogue that influences dominant cultures. There are only a few minor problems and misrepresentations in Hix’s translation (which are also found in the original text). In Section 1, Hix uses “Arab” instead of the adjective “Arabic” when speaking of that particular language. It also seems unnecessary to keep the Estonian version “Tolstoi” instead of the English “Tolstoy” in Section 3, especially since Chekhov’s name appears in the translation in its English spelling. Another small error occurs in Section 16, where the name of Estonian author Kreutzwald is italicized and thus gives the impression that *Kreutzwald* is the title of Estonia’s national epic. Nevertheless, these minor problems do not really affect the overall content and effect of Talvet’s essay. The author’s fascinating cosmopolitan approach to everyday life is successfully conveyed through Hix’s translation.

In conclusion, Jüri Talvet’s *A Call for Cultural Symbiosis* is undoubtedly one of the latest, highly-regarded, non-fiction books published in Estonia in recent years and deserves to find its way to English-speaking audiences. The essay’s remarkable way of expressing his thoughtful, reflective views via meditative writing strengthens the call for a dialogue of equals between marginalized cultures on the one hand and dominant cultures on the other. It is fortunate that Harvey L. Hix’s translation skillfully conveys the breadth and depth of this call’s philosophical positions as well as retains in many ways Talvet’s cosmopolitan, yet personal, sensibility.

Leonard R. Koos, Reviewer

When the Algerian-born author Assia Djebar was inducted into the forty-member Académie Française in 2005 and thus became one of only a handful of women as well as people not born in France to receive that honor in the institution’s three-hundred-seventy-two year history, a number of eyebrows were no doubt raised. After all, a postcolonial feminist author who has consistently voiced an uncompromising condemnation of France’s colonial past in North Africa and published a recent work entitled *La Disparition de la langue française* (*The Disappearance of the French Language*), did not exactly fit the standard profile of the membership of an institution charged with maintaining and championing the integrity of the French language. Other observers, who were perhaps more optimistic if not more enlightened, saw Djebar’s election into this elite, albeit conservative, French cultural institution as a sign of the latter’s own struggle to remain relevant in the twentieth-first century while recognizing the Algerian-born author’s importance in the world of francophone literature.

The path that led Assia Djebar to her membership in the Académie Française follows the twists and turns of an unexpected biography that began in French-colonial Algeria and most recently finds the author dividing her time between Paris and New York City, where she teaches at New York University. Born Fatima-Zohra Imalayen in Cherchell, Algeria in 1936 and sent to France for her secondary schooling, she began to use the pseudonym “Assia Djebar” with the publication of her first novel *La Soif* (*The Mischief*), which appeared in 1958 and was compared at that time to Françoise Sagan’s bestseller *Bonjour tristesse*. When the political turmoil and war of independence engulfed Algeria in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Djebar collaborated with the resistance movement and press and lived in exile for a time in Rabat, Morocco. During this period, she published two more novels: *Les Impatients* (*The Impatient Ones, 1958*) and *Les Enfants du Nouveau Monde* (*The Children of the New World, 1962*), both of which represent the plight of women in Algeria’s struggle for independence. Following the war, Djebar returned to Algeria and taught history at the University of Algiers. As a nationalist Algeria attempted to dismantle the political and cultural mechanisms of one hundred thirty-two years of French colonial domination, Djebar was criticized for writing in French rather than in Arabic. During the 1960s, she published the novel *Les Alouettes naïves* (*The Naïve Larks*), penned the poetry collection *Poèmes pour l’Algérie heureuse* (*Poems for a Happy Algeria, 1969*), and wrote the theatrical version of *Les Alouettes naïves* as well as another play, *Rouge l’aube* (*Red the Dawn, 1969*). For the next decade, she did not publish any work; instead, she studied classical Arabic, directed her first film, and worked on theatrical productions.

While living in Paris in 1980, Assia Djebar broke her self-imposed silence in print with the notable short story collection *Femmes d’Alger dans leur appartement* (*Women of Alger in Their Apartment*). (The title of the work was based on that of the famous orientalist painting by Eugène Delacroix.) Her best known novel *L’Amour, la fantasia* (published in English as *Fantasia, An Algerian Cavalcade*), appeared in 1985 as part of a projected quartet and firmly established her literary reputation in the French and francophone world as an important postcolonial feminist writer. Two more novels in the unfinished quartet, *Ombre sultane* (1987) and *Loin de Médine* (1991), appeared subsequently and further explored and developed the theme of linking the struggles of postcolonial Algerian women to their historical
antecedents in Islam’s past. Other major texts followed: in 1995, *Vaste est la prison*; in 1996, *Le Blanc de l’Algérie*; in 1997, *Oran, langue morte* and *Les Nuits de Strasbourg*; and in 2002 an augmented edition of *Femmes d’Alger dans leur appartement*. In these works, Djebar increasingly focused her attention on the victimization of Algerian women in the political and social chaos of the fundamentalist factionalism that emerged in Algeria following the suspension of elections in early 1992. The increasingly international perspective of Djebar’s works has been recognized in recent years by the awards and honors she has received: the American Neustadt Prize for Contributions to World Literature (1996); the French *Prix Margaret Yourcenar* for *Oran, langue morte* (1997); and the German *Friedenspreis des Deutschen Buchhandels* (2000). Prior to her election to the *Académie Française* in 2005, Djebar became a member in 2001 of the *Académie Royale de la Langue Française de Belgique*.

Despite Djebar’s undisputed prominence as a postcolonial francophone writer, the availability of her written works in the English-speaking world (not to mention the distribution of the two films she directed) has been frustrating until recently. The majority of the English translations of Djebar’s works that have been published come from her “mature” period. Her most well-known novel, *L’Amour, la fantasia* was translated as *Fantasia, An Algerian Cavalcade* by Dorothy S. Blair for Quartet Books in 1985. Blair’s translations of the other two novels in the unfinished series, *Ombre sultane* and *Loin de Médine*, which appeared respectively as *A Sister to Scheherazade* (1987) and *Far from Medina* (1994), were also published by Quartet Books. In 1992, Marjolijn de Jager published her translation of Djebar’s important short story collection *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment* (University of Virginia Press). Seven Stories Press has more recently published two English translations of Djebar’s works: *Algerian White*, a translation by de Jager and David Kelly of *Le Blanc de l’Algérie*, appeared in 2000 and *So Vast the Prison*, a translation of *Vaste est la prison* by Betsy Wing, appeared in 2001. The English translation of Djebar’s first novel, *La Soif*, was translated by Frances Frenaye under the title *The Mischief* (Simon and Schuster, 1958) and has long been out-of-print. In 2005, de Jager translated for the Feminist Press *The Children of the New World*, Djebar’s early novel on the Algerian war of independence and the refugee camps it created. Most recently (2006), Seven Stories Press significantly contributed to the English translations of Djebar’s works with the publication of *The Tongue’s Blood Does Not Run Dry*, Tegan Raleigh’s translation of the award-winning short story collection *Oran, langue morte*.

The most immediately striking point of comparison between the original French-language text, *Oran, langue morte*, and Raleigh’s English translation of it, *The Tongue’s Blood Does Not Run Dry*, is the difference in the title chosen for the English version. The French title, which translates as “Oran, dead language/tongue,” is the name of the first story in Djebar’s collection; in the story, an Algerian woman writes letters recounting how a trip to her native Oran to attend her aunt’s funeral causes her to relive the events of her mother’s murder during the war of independence in 1962. The title of Raleigh’s version derives, however, from that of the collection’s afterward (itself based on an epigraph quote from *Vaste est la prison*), wherein the author acknowledges the women whose daily lives and stories have inspired her. The complete change in the title of the English translation, which was clearly sanctioned by an author whose multiple residencies in the United States suggest a certain familiarity with the English language as well as with American or Anglo-Saxon culture, is at the outset significant on a number of levels. The French title includes a proper noun of a place followed by a comma, a seemingly unrelated common noun with two possible meanings (“tongue” or “language”), and an adjective which does not clarify the meaning of the common noun
 (“dead tongue” or “dead language”). Djebar’s original title thus locates the work in a particular geopolitical and cultural context that resonates with the francophone and French reader. Notable as well in the French text, beyond the polysemantic nature of the word “langue,” is its fragmentary form. By contrast, the English title erases entirely the specificity of place (though admittedly Oran and Algeria are much less part of the American and Anglo-Saxon cultural heritage than that of the French because of differing imperial and colonial histories) and provides the reader with a somewhat ambiguous, perhaps even tantalizingly mysterious, complete sentence. In addition, the English title of the French afterword’s original title, “Le sang ne sèche pas dans la langue” (more literally, the blood does not dry in the tongue/language), literalizes substantially the polysemantic potential of the English word “tongue.”

As readers familiar with Assia Djebar’s French prose know, the literary style of her mature works is quite often subtly fragmented, e.g., in the title *Oran, langue morte*. While a number of critics have suggested that Djebar attempts through this admittedly oral style to recreate in French the chant-like and incantatory structures of traditional Arabic and Berber song and literature, the recurrently fragmented French style has the additional signification of mirroring the repressed, interrupted, and partially silenced voices of the female North African subject. Although the French language supports more conventionally what in English we call sentence fragments, Raleigh’s translation frequently modifies these structures to create more coherent sentences or passages. For example, in the story “Burning” (whose title has been significantly modified from the French “La Fièvre dans les yeux d’enfant” [“Fever in a Child’s Eyes”]), the narrator evokes those known and unknown to her who have been killed by the violence in Algeria and then muses in the original, “Pourquoi l’évoquer, pourquoi prendre la plume: désespoir de survivre, dégoût de parler et de dire?” A literal translation of this sentence would be “Why evoke it, why take up my pen: the despair of surviving, the disgust of speaking and telling?” Raleigh’s translation converts and alters the telegraphic, interior monologue of the original: “Why am I taking up my pen, bringing it back? Maybe I’ve abandoned all hopes of survival; maybe I’ve grown weary of talking about it, of telling” (45). Not only has the English version here significantly expanded into full sentences the original fragments, but the order of the verbs associated with writing and memory has also been inverted at the outset, suggesting perhaps a different relationship of causality between the two. In another example, at the beginning of the brief story “Annie and Fatima” (which recounts the events surrounding a Frenchwoman’s return to Algeria to see her bi-cultural daughter who has been separated from her) we read the following: “This is the story of a friend of my sister’s, Annie. They knew each other in Paris while taking a Berber class together” (129). Compared to the original French text, one notes that Raleigh has created a full sentence with a demonstrative tone (“This is…”) from the far less declarative sentence fragment (“Récit de…”). Even more striking, the second sentence does not appear in the original for another two pages but has clearly been included at the beginning in order to clarify any ambiguity in the relationships between the narrator, her sister, and Annie, who has come from Paris and is staying in Algiers with the narrator. In these and a number of other examples, the fragmented style, the structural ellipses and indirection, and the intentional ambiguity of the French text have been significantly modified and minimized in the English translation, thereby creating a text that is arguably more expository if not more cohesive.

The vast majority of texts written in French by non-European authors present a further complication when being translated into English (or any other language) in that the original typically includes any number of indigenous words and expressions that remain untranslated and unglossed in the original
This phenomenon in francophone literature not only conveys that there are certain words and perhaps realities in the indigenous language and culture that cannot be converted entirely into French, but it also ideologically delimits degrees of understanding between francophone and French reading communities. Assia Djebar’s stories in Oran, langue morte are no exception to this textual practice, although in a number of instances she parenthetically or contextually adds an explanatory detail that renders Arabic or Berber words comprehensible. Raleigh’s translation, which is not annotated except for several brief endnotes included in the original, follows the conventional practice of not translating these non-French words and expressions but simply italicizes them in the English-language text. There are, however, other French and North African words, comprehensible to both a French and francophone reader, which have been treated by the translator in the same way. For example, in the story “Félicie’s Body,” the untranslated expressions “pieds noirs” and “harkis” — referring respectively to French citizens born in colonial Algeria and Algerian combatants on the side of France during the war for independence who were offered asylum in France after the war’s conclusion in 1962 — are used multiple times and placed in quotation marks in the original. In the English translation, however, they are italicized like the untranslated Arabic and Berber words. Brief annotations of some of these sorts of expressions as well as of certain historically contextual details referring to the Algerian war of independence — for example, the acronyms that refer to the various groups in the struggle on both sides — would be useful to English-speaking readers.

As all translators well know, the process of translation constitutes an intense and complex interrogation of choices that negotiates not only between languages and their words but also between cultures and their readerships. The task of the translator is to gauge appropriately those choices according to the conventions and expectations of a linguistically and culturally different reader and to mediate difference and loss in the process of shifting from one language to another. Tegan Raleigh, a professional translator of German, English, and French has made a number of choices in The Tongue’s Blood Does Not Run Dry that adapt aspects of Djebar’s French text to the conventions of English-language prose. Raleigh’s English version of Oran, langue morte substantially reduces, however, the force of Djebar’s self-consciously fragmented and raw prose style. While the form of the French text not only reflects but also performs in the process of reading the threats or realities of the violence that postcolonial Algerian women confront both at home and abroad, the translation presented in The Tongue’s Blood Does Not Dry relies far more exclusively on the cerebral impact — still considerable but markedly diminished — of these stories’ characters, themes, and tragedies.


Leah Chang, Reviewer

In their bilingual edition of Louise Labé’s prose and poetry, Deborah Lesko Baker and Annie Finch offer scholars, students, and teachers an elegant, much-awaited, and long overdue critical translation of one of the most important women writers of sixteenth-century France. Labé has become increasingly important in the last twenty years not only to the scholarship but also to the undergraduate and graduate teaching of the early modern period in France. Yet in Anglophone countries, her work remains accessible to a relatively narrow audience, i.e., scholars who read sixteenth-century French easily and students...
whose linguistic capabilities allow them to read some of her writings, most often limited to her poetry. As the first major translation of Labé’s entire corpus to appear in twenty years (and only the second translation of the complete works ever published), this edition breathes new life into her work for both specialists and non-specialists. It also enables instructors to include her in broadly conceived undergraduate and graduate courses offered in English, such as those featuring women’s writing or European early modern literature. As a bilingual edition, Complete Poetry and Prose will also help students of French literature grapple with the difficulties of sixteenth-century French language, style, and spelling, as well as, in a different vein, engage various theoretical questions surrounding translation and its praxis. The scholarly and pedagogic contribution of the book lies, however, not only in its elegant and well-wrought translations, or its thorough yet accessible introductory analyses of both Labé’s texts and the methodologies that informed the translators’ renderings into English. In this edition’s very objective — to bring Labé to a twenty-first-century audience — and in its conception as a collaborative project, Complete Poetry and Prose also underscores an inherent modernity in Labé’s writings, one that has always been at the heart of her appeal.

The volume is divided into two parts: the first is dedicated to Labé’s prose and the second to her poetry. In addition to the French and English versions of her poems, this edition also contains extensive historical and analytical material: two general introductions (one by the editors of The Other Voice series and one by Lesko Baker); an introduction to the prose and one to the poetry section; two bibliographies of important primary and secondary sources; and “Translator’s Notes” by both Lesko Baker and Finch. The introductions and notes situate Labé’s work both broadly — in terms of the female social and literary condition in Europe predating the early modern period — and more specifically with regard to Labé’s life, literary interventions, and how her work was received by her contemporaries.

The “Introduction to the Series” (by Margaret King and Albert Rabil Jr.) defines the “Other Voice” as “a voice of protest” (xxxix), female but sometimes male, against a largely misogynist and patriarchal historical and cultural backdrop. This brief but conscientious introduction is by design a review and covers topics ranging from women in Greek philosophy and Roman Law to women’s roles in the church, humanist attitudes toward women, theoretical questions of gender and power, and the vexed problem of women and chastity. The “Volume Editor’s Introduction” (by Lesko Baker) develops this framework by briefly covering basic information on Labé’s life, publication of her work in 1555, and reception thereof. It is also here that Lesko Baker raises the fundamental problem of male subjectivity — a chief preoccupation of early modern male-authored poetry — against which Labé’s feminism defines itself. If early to mid-sixteenth-century male writers explore the fragmentation of the male subject in order to, paradoxically, celebrate and glorify it, then what happens, Lesko Baker asks, “when the woman is no longer an abstract object of male desire but rather becomes the subject of desire in her own right, one who narrates her own journey through the vicissitudes of love?” (9–10).

Lesko Baker’s introductions to the respective sections containing Labé’s prose and poetry begin to explore this question. Neither introduction pretends to be a comprehensive analysis (Lesko Baker is very explicit on this point), but through nuanced, close readings of selected passages, these introductions help untangle the thematic and rhetorical complexities of Labé’s writing and offer a model for discerning its feminist sensibilities. The introduction to the prose section discusses Labé’s “Dedicatory Letter” and “Debate of Folly and Love.” Lesko Baker’s discussion of the dedicatory letter underscores the richness of a comparatively short text (the French and English together comprise only four pages in
This complexity is based in part on a cyclical narrative structure, which begins with the first-person, develops to a broader discussion of women in general (“nous” or “us”), and finishes by returning to the first person and a direct invocation of Labé’s addressee. The dedication also employs a number of thematic juxtapositions: the intellectual and sensual pleasures for women of reading and writing; prohibitions placed on women’s education in the past and their emancipation in the present; and an acknowledgment of women’s modesty juxtaposed with a call for their assertiveness, effectively captured in the double-entendre of the word “vertu.” Lesko Baker also highlights Labé’s insistence on her own modernity through an implicit rejection of female exempla; her letter thus becomes a tract on current social practice as much as a literary defense.

One of the strengths of Lesko Baker’s introductions is the way she reveals Labé’s writings to be thoroughly interconnected with one another, rather than separate and self-contained texts. For example, Lesko Baker shows how the “Debate of Folly and Love” takes up once again some of the decidedly feminist themes of the dedicatory letter, including a caution against divisiveness among women (which she will address again in her poetry), in preference for their solidarity against the patriarchal order (personified in the figure of Jupiter). Most importantly, Lesko Baker shows how Labé’s text is thoroughly in dialogue with a male poetic, particularly Petrarchan, tradition which Labé subtly attempts to overturn. The social change, for instance, that Labé advocated in the dedicatory preface is once again evident in her “Debate,” where Love (Cupid) first asserts then moves away from a traditional Petrarchan and Neo-Platonic “sublimation of sensuality” (33) to embrace a mutual physical expression of love and desire. This is a posture that inherently acknowledges and promotes a notion of reciprocal love and, more importantly, a notion of female desire not usually expressed in the early modern literary tradition.

Lesko Baker’s introduction to the poetry walks readers through intricate points, especially in the elegies, whose length and difficulty make them less popular among readers than the sonnet sequences. As in her discussion of the prose, Lesko Baker masterfully shows the thematic and stylistic connections between the elegies and sonnets, tying both back to important themes developed in the dedicatory letter and the “Debate.” Labé’s subversion of the Petrarchan tradition is again a central issue. This subversion, however, is not without nuance and depth. Lesko Baker is careful to develop the multiple traditions on which Labé draws and from which she departs — Sapphic, Catullian, and Ovidian, in addition to Petrarchan — and to foreground the interplay among these traditions in the poetry. What emerges from her analysis is a female and feminist poetic voice that is at once engaged with its poetic predecessors and contemporaries and also sensitive to the gendered differences and perspectives entailed in those disparate traditions.

Both Lesko Baker and Finch include translator’s notes that clearly outline each of their respective methodologies. Lesko Baker helpfully compares her own approach to that of other translators who have preceded her, most notably Anne-Marie Bourbon, Edith Farrell, and Jeanne Prine. Lesko Baker’s principal objective in tackling the prose is readability, especially, as she puts it, Labé’s dense and difficult prose often presents significant “obstacles to readability” for the specialist and general reader alike (39). Her goal is thus to “make the English version of these texts not only more accurate and idiomatic but simply more fun to read” (41). In this endeavor, she has succeeded entirely. Readers familiar with the difficult “Débat” in French will be pleasantly surprised at how well Lesko Baker’s English “Debate” moves. Her translation is in many ways true to both the letter and the spirit of the text. Its style is both clear and elegantly simple, yet not simplistic; although the
translation employs a modern idiom, it is by no means overburdened with colloquialisms that would date it. A comparison between the French and English shows very few grammatical interpolations in the translation, except in a few deserving instances, such as where the subject of the French sentence needs clarification. The greatest changes to the original text occur on the level of syntax, punctuation, and organization. Lesko Baker frequently breaks up Labé’s longer sentences or exchanges confusing colons in the original for the more definitive full-stop. She also divides Labé’s prose into separate paragraphs in the English; in the French, she demarcates where those breaks occur using paragraph symbols in brackets so as to alert the reader without compromising the organizational integrity of the original version. Furthermore, carefully prepared notes address both historical and mythological references in the text and more difficult points of translation.

Finch’s translations of Labé’s poetry are innovative, as Lesko Baker herself puts it, although some of her choices may be more controversial than others. In the introduction to the section of poetry, Lesko Baker discusses Finch’s work and specifies how the latter’s versions differ from previous translations. The distinctions drawn are significant for modern scholarship. Finch’s renditions are the first to preserve in English the Petrarchan rhyme scheme for every one of the twenty-six sonnets, whereas other translators used either English forms or loose variations of Petrarchan ones. Lesko Baker takes the discussion one step further to show how Finch reads Labé through these innovative translations. Finch’s translations are indeed beautifully crafted and dynamic. If at times some of her vocabulary choices determine meanings that the original French leaves more ambiguous, then she nonetheless captures thoroughly the sensual passion and the startling modernity of the poems. Perhaps the most controversial element in the translations is Finch’s addition of titles to the English elegies and sonnets. Although some critics might see these headings as determining the respective meanings of the poems (especially for non-French readers) in ways that the original French did not, Finch and Lesko Baker are both careful to emphasize that these are Finch’s creative additions. The titles, moreover, are clearly demarcated by brackets, which indicate their status as additions to be considered or ignored as desired. For instructors, the titles can serve a pedagogic purpose by showing the extent to which these translations (like all translations) are subjective and personal readings: in the titles, Finch gives us her own personal sense of the heart of each poem.

Readers interested in Labé’s work as a historical artifact should take note that this edition is not a translation of either the entire 1555 or 1556 Lyonnais edition. Noticeably absent are translations of the twenty-six, male-authored, laudatory poems that accompanied Labé’s writings in the original sixteenth-century French publications. Including these poems, one might argue, could have added yet another historical dimension to the book and shed additional light on the ways in which Labé’s work constitutes an “other voice.” Nevertheless, the originality and divergence of Labé’s prose and poetry stand on their own. Scholars of Labé will want to consult this edition for their own pleasure and edification as well as research. The translations may very well even become standard. For teachers of French or European literature and of early modern women’s writings, the book is indispensable. Lesko Baker and Finch have produced a critically rich, analytically subtle, and elegantly translated bilingual edition that is also refreshingly honest about its objectives and methodologies. As specialists of Labé are by now well aware, recent critical work has questioned the historical reality of Labé as a writer. Although this line of inquiry is perhaps overdetermined, it captures the scholarly imagination and does suggest approaches to teaching Labé. This new bilingual edition demonstrates, however, that Labé resonates most powerfully not as a historical figure but first and foremost as a “voice” that traces a
specifically feminine, feminist, and decidedly unified subjectivity. This effect remains regardless of whether it was produced by a single female writer or a sixteenth-century collaboration; it can also still be heard in the translations of Lesko Baker and Finch. By conveying Labé’s message so effectively and passionately to a twenty-first-century audience, Lesko Baker and Finch argue and demonstrate persuasively how original, modern, and most importantly, vital, the poetic voice of Louise Labé resounds.

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Notes

1 Lesko Baker’s introductions adapt for a more general audience many of the points and analyses of her full-length study of Labé’s corpus in English, The Subject of Desire: Petrarchan Poetics and the Female Voice in Louise Labé (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1996).


3 Mireille Huchon, Louise Labé: Une créature du papier (Genève: Droz, 2006).


Jean Anderson, Reviewer

Since Andrew Wilson’s translation was published, several of Amélie Nothomb’s other works have made their way onto the scene in the English-speaking world. Including Loving Sabotage (Le Sabotage amoureux), some half a dozen books are available in English: Fear and Trembling (Stupeur et tremblements, 1999), translated in 2001 by Adriana Hunter; The Character of Rain (Métaphysique des tubes, 2000), translated in 2002 by Timothy Bent; The Book of Proper Names (Robert des noms propres, 2002), translated in 2004 by Shaun Whiteside; Antichrista (Antéchrista, 2003), translated in 2005 by Whiteside; The Life of Hunger (Biographie de la faim, 2004), translated in 2006 by Whiteside; and Sulphuric Acid (Acide sulphurique, 2005), translated in 2007 by Whiteside. Andrew Wilson’s translation is thus one of the earliest of the English translations of Nothomb’s work.

Originally published in 1993, Le Sabotage amoureux was the follow-up to the young French author’s ground-breaking Hygiène de l’assassin (1992), which had an enormous and instantaneous impact as well as set the scene for her now famous series of quirkily written, auto-fictional novels that are half-way between autobiography and fiction. Nothomb, nominally of Belgian nationality, was born in Japan into a diplomatic family. She then lived in rather quick succession in China, New York, and Bangladesh.

The contrasts and paradoxes of Nothomb’s life experiences are reflected to a considerable degree not just in the subject matter of her books, several of which explore the clash of cultures, but also in her inimitable writing style. Reviewers of her work habitually speak of “vitriol,” of sharpness, and of a scathing wit. Indeed, the dust cover of Wilson’s translation for New Directions quotes from a review originally published in Le Figaro that highlights Nothomb’s “verve, vulgarity, provocation, wit, cutting words and paradoxical formulas” that help create a clear impression of “ill-tempered purity and a perverse innocence.” The combination of childhood experiences and an extremely sophisticated, even erudite, adult perspective is a common factor in several of her works.
Loving Sabotage shares with the later Stupeur et tremblements (and other of Nothomb’s novels) a central first-person character who is set down in another culture. Whereas the subsequent work relates a young Belgian woman’s misadventures while employed in Japan, Loving Sabotage tells the story of a young girl in Peking who, except for when she rides her trusty bicycle, rarely ventures outside the confines of the multinational diplomatic community. She meets and falls in love with Elena, an attractive but emotionally detached Italian girl.

When not attending the hopelessly incompetent French school, the narrator is deeply involved in the gang warfare that rages between rival groups of children in the “international ghetto” where diplomats and their families are housed. Much of the text is devoted to detailing the unhygienic and even scatological tortures inflicted on “enemy” captives. The obvious challenge to the translator is to maintain the witty lightness of the original texts in spite of the unsavoriness of the events, a wittiness arising in part from Nothomb’s use of elaborate language and sophisticated concepts juxtaposed with banal actions or with expressions or images of a distinctly lower register.

Such deliberate inconsistencies of tone are an enormous challenge in translation; it is no small achievement to capture accurately the delicate balance of tone and register, as well as perversity and innocence, between the distanced adult voice and the child’s immediacy of experience. When the text deals with such a range of elements, from children urinating into their unsuspecting neighbours’ yoghurt to Wittgenstein’s reflections on life, it is desperately important to find the appropriate tone at all times if the book is not to cross that invisible but crucial line that separates the original author’s authority from the supposition of an inadequate translation.

Let me say at once that Andrew Wilson’s translation taken ‘dry’, that is, without comparison with the source text, reads very well indeed, and certainly manages to convey the essentials of both story and character. There are, nevertheless, some issues that warrant consideration. Admittedly, given Nothomb’s preferred style, occasional stiltedness may be a reflection of the original. It is worth thinking about, however, that the linguistic difference between English and French known as the “doublet savant” or “learned equivalent” means that the closest (Latinate) equivalent to the French may have a more usual (Anglo-Saxon) term. Liberté, for example, may equate to both liberty and freedom, with a difference of register. To choose an example from Loving Sabotage, why translate “La question de l’après-moi ne me préoccupait pas” (46) by “The question of post-me occupied my thoughts but little” (30)? A less stiff alternative is available: “The question of post-me was not a concern.” Keeping the register slightly lower whenever possible by opting for the less “savant” term in English would mitigate a problem frequently encountered in French-to-English translation: that of over-elaborate language due to direct influence of the French forms, a problem — I need hardly add — that is particularly acute in dealing with Nothomb’s style.

Wilson does opt for simplicity at times, but this is not always respectful of the formal elements of the writing:

C’est pourtant là, au coeur de la Cité des Ventilateurs, que ma décadence a commencé. Elle a débuté à l’instant où j’ai compris que le centre du monde, ce n’était pas moi. Elle a débuté à l’instant où j’ai été émerveillée de découvrir qui était le centre du monde. (47)

becomes:

Nonetheless, it was in the heart of the city of Electric Fans that my decadence began. It commenced the moment I realized I was not the centre of the world. The moment I discovered, to my astonishment, who the centre of the world actually was. (31)

While I would not quibble with the rearrangement of paragraphs in many cases, Nothomb’s somewhat aphoristic style relies
heavily on a punchy sentence division that Wilson regularly smooths over into longer syntagms and paragraphs. This is the most consistent stylistic difference between the original and the translated text.

Some cultural differences result in a perceived need for adjustment in translation: “encre de Chine — encre doublement de Chine” (45) clearly poses a problem when the English equivalent is “Indian ink” (29), but is the transposition of “jardins d’Allah” (30) into “Nirvana” (18) a stroke of genius or an unnecessary intervention? Elsewhere, Wilson’s interpretations are more obvious: “la peau couleur de sable mouillé” (49) becomes “skin the color of sand on a dampened beach” (32), when perhaps the addition of a color adjective (e.g., “golden”) would have been more helpful to the reader. One might also question the elaboration of “les adultes étaient consternés” (52) into “the adult foreigners lived depressed and uneasy lives” (32), or the loss of imagery in rendering “décrire Eléna renvoyait le Cantique des cantiques au rang des inventaires de boucherie” (50) as “compared with a proper description of Elena, the Song of Songs was a shopping list” (32), where the butcher’s inventory of cuts of meat is lost in favor of a much more neutral grocery list.

The somewhat odd expression “over-aged adolescents that we are” (113) for “les grands dadais que nous sommes” (158), more usually “over-grown” or “great lumps” may be attributed to the translator’s personal preference. On the other hand, there are some clear indications of erroneous interpretation: “ancient ghetto” (12) for “ancien ghetto” (21), which is more properly “former ghetto”; and “my copy” (80) for “ma copie” (114), which should be “my work.”

These errors, however, do not detract from the overall success of Wilson’s translation of Nothomb’s Le Sabotage amoureux, particularly when these errors are considered in the context of the very considerable stylistic difficulties encountered in dealing with this particular author’s work. The translation flows well on the whole and generally captures the adult-child voice of the narrative convincingly. In many instances, Wilson’s choices are convincing and the book maintains the tricky balance between opposing elements. Stylistic considerations of the kind I have highlighted here are unlikely to be of concern to the majority of readers, and the idiosyncrasies of Amélie Nothomb’s work clearly deserve to reach a wider audience.


Richard Millington, Reviewer

“Translations are always disgusting
But they brought me a lot of money.”
— Thomas Bernhard, *Der Weltverbesserer*

Bernhard’s characteristically caustic remarks about translators and translation should not distract us from the excellent work done (above all) by David McLintock in bringing the works of this master manipulator of German syntax — and master vituperator of post-war Austrian society — to an English-speaking readership. With Bernhard’s status as a major writer of international standing now beyond question, the translations look set to proliferate. Multiple English versions of several better-known works are already available, and it is only a question of time before the remaining gaps in his oeuvre are filled.

One such gap is represented by the *Gesammelte Gedichte* (*Collected Poems*), compiled and edited by Bernhard himself in the last decade of his life. A large step toward filling this gap has been taken with the appearance of James Reidel’s translations of the second and third of Bernhard’s five lyric
cycles: *In Hora Mortis / Under the Iron of the Moon*, a recent addition to Princeton’s already extensive Lockert Library of Poetry in Translation. The lengthy “Translator’s Preface” makes clear, however, that this book has a higher aim than just expanding our knowledge of Bernhard’s writings; it is meant also to realign our perceptions of the author’s literary development. The period of Bernhard’s poetic production, concentrated in the late 1950s and early 1960s, was relatively brief. Although the poems were moderately successful, the traditional view is that they are overly derivative (fellow Austrian Georg Trakl is clearly the biggest influence) and ultimately amounted to a false start; only as a novelist and later a playwright did Bernhard truly find his own voice. Reidel calls this conclusion into question and looks for links between Bernhard’s poetry and prose that would lead to a more insightful analysis. The translator is especially keen to reveal in the poetry embryonic forms of Bernhard’s fondness for histrionics, which he sees for example in the treatment of God, the addressee of the cycle *In Hora Mortis*: “What Bernhard does to the divine audience points to what he did to the human audiences of his fiction and theatre” (xi–xiii).

In using this approach, Reidel follows a recent trend in Bernhard criticism — represented by Hans Höller, Grazia Pulvirenti and Paola Bozzi — that challenges the interpretation of a break at an early stage of Bernhard’s career and emphasizes instead the elements of continuity in his transition from poet to novelist. (Reidel’s failure to acknowledge these critics in his summary of responses to the poetry is unfortunate, especially in relation to Bozzi, whose work has been published in English). Yet Reidel carries this line of argument to an unprecedented and indeed tenuous extreme, suggesting that the bitterness and disgust that mark the novels and dramas may be “a byproduct of wounded pride over the rejection of a book of poems” (xvi). The book in question is what would have become Bernhard’s fourth cycle, had it not been turned down for publication in 1961, an event that Reidel sees as a “marker over the crushed and disappointed young poet’s transfiguration into the Bernhard of official biographies” (xvii). This thesis is problematic for two reasons. First, as an attempt to “explain away” biographically Bernhard’s violent repudiation of the Austrian establishment, it serves only to dodge the very issues Bernhard raises. Second, even biographically the argument does not stack up, for the rejection of this one book did not in fact signal the end of Bernhard’s poetic activity: *Die Irren. Die Häftlinge (The Lunatics. The Inmates)* appeared just one year later in 1962. Evidently the young poet was not as “crushed and disappointed” as Reidel would have it. Indeed, we might question to what extent the continuity argument can be taken as meaningful without consideration of Bernhard’s poetic development across all five of his lyric cycles (Bozzi undertakes just such an analysis). Perhaps such a discussion is best reserved for when a full translation of the *Collected Poems* appears.

What, then, of the translations in *In Hora Mortis / Under the Iron of the Moon*? With these, Reidel sets himself no simple task: “I have tried to provide an English rendering that corresponds line-by-line with the German text yet reads as naturally and histrionically as the original and can exist on its own” (xvii, Reidel’s emphasis). The book is thus aimed both at Anglophone poetry buffs for whom the German texts are inaccessible and at students of German literature who can read the translations as glosses of the original poems presented on facing pages. To this end, Reidel’s job is made somewhat easier by Bernhard’s almost exclusive use of free verse (the one rhyming poem, “Unmerklich weht der Wind,” is translated into free verse too). Judging from the unanimously exultant publisher’s reviews — “masterful,” “accurate and inspired,” “careful,” “excellent” — the project has been an unqualified success. There is no doubt that Reidel, who is himself an established poet, comes up with some deft
touches in certain difficult passages, as with the repetition he introduces in the opening lines of “Zerfall mein Gott” from In Hora Mortis:

Zerfall mein Gott
der meine Qual zu
Staub stößt

To dust my God
who pounds my
torment to dust

(12–13)

The following short poem from Under the Iron of the Moon provides a further example of Reidel’s skilful handling of Bernhard’s austere diction at its most powerful:

Der Hahn schreit durch ein Tuch
aus Fleisch und frisst sich in mein Blut
das mir die Brust zersägt.

The cock crows through a rag
of skin and gorges in the blood
that is sawing apart my chest.

Er trinkt mein Rot wie einen Mond und lacht,
daß auf den Gipfeln rot die Sterne
tanzen.

He drinks my color like a moon and cackles
as the stars on the mountaintop
dance red.

(52–53)

On the one hand, the bilingual edition serves — as in these poems — to highlight the translator’s own lyric virtuosity; at the same time, slip-ups that would likely pass unnoticed in a monolingual edition become obvious through juxtaposition with the source text. Notwithstanding the rave reviews, Reidel’s translations rather too often fail to live up to the standard of accuracy promised in the preface, as in the central section of “In den Fischen” (“In the fish”):

Aus schimmernden Krügen trinken wir alle
die Tage der Blüten die in Grau und Grün gefangen sind
wie ertrunken Nachtigallen.

Like drunken nightingales
we all drink days of flowers
captured in gray and green
from shimmering wine cups.

(140–141)

A couple of related problems are evident here. First, in Bernhard’s poem, the nightingales are not “drunken” but “drowned” (the German words have the same root but a different prefix: betrunken / ertrunken). Second, the element the poet likens to these birds is not the subject “wir alle” (“we all”) but the object “die Tage der Blüten / die in Grau und Grün gefangen sind” (“days of flowers / caught in gray and green”). This English version may well be able to “exist on its own,” but its value as a guide for the reader grappling with the German is questionable.

Most of the inaccuracies in these translations are of the second type rather than the first, that is to say, they are syntactical rather than lexical, and this is indicative of the peculiar challenges that are presented by Bernhard’s verse to the translator (and reader!). Similar to Trakl’s poetry, that of Bernhard constantly recycles chunks of verbal material from a relatively small vocabulary but combines these elements in unusual and often complex syntactical arrangements; in Bernhard’s case, the lines are not made any easier to decipher by the virtual absence of punctuation. One puzzling aspect of Reidel’s translations, then, is that it tends to be the syntactically more straightforward sequences that are misread, as for example in the sonnet “Die Krähenfüße des Winters laß mich sehen” (“Let me see the crow’s feet of winter”). In the German, both quatrains and both tercets begin with imperatives, but Reidel disrupts this structural principle in his rendering of the second tercet — that is, at the last possible moment! — by making the mood indicative (effectively reading zeig as zeigt) and taking Bernhard’s object as his subject (Den as Der):

Den Tümpel zeig mir aus dem dein Zorn steigt.

The pond shows me where your anger rises.

(112–113)

To reproduce the imperative in English, what is really called for is an inversion of verb and object: “Show me the pond from which your
anger rises.” In this respect, Reidel’s translation appears to sacrifice too much — sense, syntax, compositional structure — to preserve too little — word order.

Curiously, several of Reidel’s syntactical reshuffles have the effect of accentuating the morbidity of Bernhard’s verse and even injecting a touch of B-grade horror. For example, “Die weißen Blüten meines Frühlings” (“The white flowers of my spring”) contains the line “Geist erhebt den Sommer,” which could be rendered plainly as “spirit raises (or elevates / ennobles) the summer,” but the active-passive switch in the English version turns this into a resurrection: “a ghost is raised in the summer” (60–61). Similarly, a grisly transubstantiation results from the translation of the lines “mein Auge sieht was […] / […] meinen Kindern Weinen treibt ins Blut.” A plain version would be “my eye sees what […] / […] drives weeping into my children’s blood,” but here we read: “my vision sees what […] / […] makes my children’s tears into blood” (4–5). Furthermore, to confirm Reidel’s fondness for overstating the “living dead” theme wherever possible, note also the subject-object substitution in the second line of this poem (in the German literally “and looks at me as though I were long dead”):

Meine Verzweiflung kommt um Mitternacht und schaut mich an als wäre ich lange tot. My despair comes at midnight and I look on as though I were long dead.

How can we account for these incongruities? Inadequate proofreading? Quite likely this is a factor, as there are moments of untidiness in the preface as well (the year of Bernhard’s death is given wrong twice, and the German title of The Lunatics. The Inmates is seriously mangled). Or has Reidel’s determination to seek out early signs of Bernhard’s histrionics perhaps skewed his reading of these poems? In other words, is this a case of the selective misreading of literary texts to make them fit a preconceived theory (in which respect translators have a subtler but significantly more powerful instrument at their disposal than critics!)? A final example will add weight to this second hypothesis and at the same time offer an alternative perspective on Bernhard’s renunciation of poetry for prose:

Wie schwer fällt mir ein Wort an die Verkommenen die einen Traum nicht unterscheiden können von den starken Ästen des Birnbaums.

How hard my word drops on the depraved who can’t tell a dream from the strong branches of the pear tree.

Wie schwer fällt mir ein Wort auf dieser staubigen Straße die meinen Schuhen feindlicher ist als die Sonne dem Schnee und das Wasser der Wüste.

How hard my word drops on this dusty street unfriendly to my shoes like sun to snow, water to the desert.

Wie schwer fällt mir ein Wort an meinen Vater und an meine Mutter, wie schwer fällt mir ein Wort an alle die mich sehen, alternd in einem erstochenen Herbst.

How hard my word drops on my father and mother, how hard my word drops on everyone watching me, aging in an autumn stabbed dead.

Wie schwer fällt mir ein Wort in diesen Tagen die vergeblich sind.

How hard my word drops in these days that are oblivious.

Wie schwer fällt mir ein Wort.

How hard my word drops.

This poem, one of the last in Under the Iron of the Moon, lists the circumstances that make verbal expression, the very medium of his art, so difficult for the poet: the insensitivity of the society in which he lives (section 1), the perceived hostility of his environment (section
(section 3), the historical context (section 4). These circumstances are at least what the German conveys. Reidel’s English version turns this sense on its head, describing not the poet’s difficulty but rather the difficulty of his audience in withstanding the vehemence of his verbal attacks. This transformation would seem to be a result of a (fairly elementary) misreading of the verbal phrase schwer fallen, which in certain contexts could conceivably be equivalent to “drop hard,” but normally — and in combination with a personal pronoun in the dative (here mir) — unequivocally means “be difficult.” A plain translation of “Wie schwer fällt mir ein Wort / an die Verkommenen” might thus be “How hard for me to find a word / to the depraved.” Still, in view of Reidel’s apparently revisionist motives, it is hard to conclude that only an elementary misreading is at fault here. Here, once again and more clearly than ever, we see Reidel superimposing Bernhard the novelist and playwright — whose words certainly did “drop hard,” even causing several scandals — onto Bernhard the poet, who in fact admits he is struggling for words. Noteworthy from a developmental point of view is rather the struggle itself, for before very long Bernhard was to overcome the obstacles to expression evoked here, and he did so precisely by adopting a new genre: narrative prose. Significantly, in his novels the words stream at the reader in an unrelenting torrent, with many sentences spanning dozens of lines, some entire pages. The same adverse conditions listed in “Wie schwer fällt mir ein Wort” act less as hindrances to expression than as inspiration, an inexhaustible source of grist to Bernhard’s voraciously grinding mill.

Interpretations and misinterpretations aside, the overall impression made by In Hora Mortis / Under the Iron of the Moon is positive. The book is successful on two counts: first, it convincingly demonstrates that Bernhard’s poetry ought to be better known not just as a supplement to the more familiar prose works but also for its own substantial merits; second, it contributes at the same time significantly, despite conspicuous and avoidable lapses, to making this same poetry accessible to a wider readership. If, as we should hope, this collection proves to be a trial run for the translation of the full Collected Poems, then we should also hope that this next project is approached with the appropriate care and rigor. Bernhard’s poetry deserves it.


Nina Serebrianik, Reviewer

Robert Chandler’s anthology of Russian short stories spans a period of more than one hundred fifty years, during which era the bulk of Russian literature was created and the major genres represented in this collection — from the fantastic to political satire — developed. At the same time, this is also the period that witnessed some of the major political events in Russian history, including the victory over Napoleon in 1812, the abolition of serfdom in 1861, the Communist Revolution of 1917, the Second World War, and the fall of the Soviet Union. All of these events, of course, had a profound impact on the lives and works of Russian writers. Some knowledge of these historical situations is necessary, then, in order to understand many of the stories included in this anthology and Chandler supplies us with this information, as well as some literary background, in several ways. First, he provides an introduction that outlines the connections between Russian political history and literature and discusses briefly the history of Russian literature from its origins in song and prayer to its modern forms. To set the stage for the short stories, Chandler draws attention to the folk tradition (anekdot) and the importance of poetry in Russian culture; this discussion is brief and to the point, lasting only a paragraph. Yet the importance of being aware of these
The influence becomes very evident when we read the stories by Turgenev, with his imitations of peasants’ speech; by Leskov, with his deliberately folksy, semi-illiterate narrative modeled after the tradition of oral narrative; by Zoshchenko and Kharms, with their use of anekdot, the “story-cum-joke” that Chandler points out (xi); and by Buida, with his allusion to Pushkin’s famous poem, “I loved you,” which most Russians know by heart but which is likely completely unknown to Western readers. Chandler’s introduction thus creates a cultural context for the stories in this collection, preventing confusion and bewilderment and making it easier to appreciate and enjoy these works.

In addition, Chandler discusses the importance of the short story as a major literary form in Russia and notes its relatively minor status in the English-speaking world. Again, his observation is extremely brief but provides an insight not only into Russia’s country’s literary culture but also into the stories he selected for this anthology. Chandler begins with Pushkin’s “The Queen of Spades,” the clear influence of which is visible in Gogol’s “The Greatcoat” and Kharms’s “The Old Woman.” The influence of Gogol’s “The Greatcoat” on Russian writing is now proverbial and in this collection the work is obviously present in the background of the stories by Turgenev, Dostoyevsky, Leskov, Chekhov, Krzhizhanovsky, Zhoshchenko, and others. Chekhov’s style, on the other hand, has obviously left an impact on Bulgakov, Platonov, and Eppel. The connections are many and, apart from showing the particular influences of particular authors, they also say a lot about how much of Russian literature has been shaped by — what else? — the short story.

To help us understand every single work in this collection, Chandler also provides short introductions to the lives and works of each of the authors. While he sometimes makes rather arbitrary statements, such as calling Pushkin’s “The Queen of Spades” nothing less than “the greatest of all Russian short stories,” his introductions are essential to our understanding of the specific linguistic, historical, and cultural situations presented in the stories. It helps to know the broader contexts prior to reading the stories and to know them without having to consult endnotes, especially when a single situation can require a rather lengthy explanation. For example, Chandler explains the rules of the card game of faro, which have been forgotten today not only in Russia but elsewhere in Europe; yet being familiar with these rules is essential for understanding “The Queen of Spades.” Similarly, when introducing Dostoyevsky’s “Bobok,” Chandler explains the meaning of the title (“little bean”) and reminds us that it is used in this story not in its literal meaning but rather as a “nonsense word.” Since Chandler in his translation does not translate the word into English but preserves the uncanny and nonsensical atmosphere of the story by keeping the Russian word in italics, it is all the more important for us to know what the word actually means. We can then appreciate Dostoyevsky’s humor and his character’s relief when he realizes that the mysterious and, for that reason, frightening word he has been hearing is nothing but a harmless “little bean.” Chandler’s introduction to “Bobok” also points out the possible connection between the word and Dostoyevsky’s epigraph to The Brothers Karamazov: the allusion is to the parable of a corn of wheat from the Gospel of John. In this brief introduction, Chandler not only explains a complicated linguistic situation but also places “Bobok” in the larger context of Dostoyevsky’s writing.

Other stories present historical situations that would not be clear to many non-Russian readers, such as the Re-Measuring Commission and the terrifying effect it has on the characters of Krzhizhanovsky’s “Quadraturn.” By providing an overview of the living conditions in Moscow at the time when Krzhizhanovsky was writing and an analysis of the impact of the Re-Measuring Commission on the author’s life, Chandler makes an otherwise foreign situation fully accessible to the reader.
Understanding the nine-square-meters-per-person rule makes the central character not only that much more engaging but also very sympathetic: without Chandler’s explanation, Sutulin’s motivation could be seen merely as greed, when it is, in fact, claustrophobia. Brief as they are, these introductions thus provide the reader with better insight into the stories, the characters, and ultimately the authors themselves.

Furthermore, Chandler provides a note on names, explaining the Russian tradition of using three names — the Christian name, the patronymic, and the last name — and the many ways people use these names and their derivatives to address each other (in real life and in the stories in this anthology). He also includes a note on ranks, a social convention that is particularly important to understand for readers interested in figuring out the complicated but extremely well-organized system of ranks and offices that is so important in Gogol’s “The Greatcoat” and Dostoyevsky’s “Bobok.” Along with the list of further readings that is attached to the introduction, this and other equally helpful notes provide detailed information and guidance for further research, serving to assist those interested in learning more without slowing down the rest of the audience.

Needless to say, such a variety of authors of different periods, styles, and movements presents their translators with just as wide a variety of challenges. Chandler’s anthology shows the many ways in which he and other translators handle the linguistic and cultural situations that are particularly foreign to their English-speaking readers. In addition to the many confusing ranks and offices of pre-Revolution Russia (discussed above), many of the stories deal with territorial divisions, administrative units, the phenomenon of immigrant cultures, and peculiarly Soviet institutions — none of which would be familiar to non-Russian speakers. For instance, the story “In the Cart” involves a Chekhov heroine who is annoyed at the local “земство,” a local administrative office that was a common feature of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Russian government. Surely, an English approximation of this word could be found or else the word could be explained within the same phrase; such strategies would smooth out the flow of the story and prevent the reader from stumbling over a confusing term. Yet these same strategies would erase the cultural and historical slant of the situation. After all, the institution of земство ceased to exist soon after the Communist Revolution and many modern-day Russians would find the word, if not as foreign, then at least as remote in time as their English counterparts would find it to be. The word, then, is an anchor to a situation specific to the Russian political culture of the period. Rosamund Bartlett’s decision first to keep the italicized Russian word “zemstvo” throughout her translation and second to use an endnote to explain its meaning are successful in preserving and accurately transferring not only the meaning of the situation but also the atmosphere that it creates. Together with the way the peasants address the heroine using only her patronymic, with the descriptions of the bureaucracy underlying the village school where she teaches, and with the picture of ubiquitous cold and snow in the middle of April, Bartlett’s use of the Russian word only enhances the reader’s experience of an unmistakably Russian story.

Robert Chandler adopts a similar strategy in his translation of Bunin’s “In Paris.” Here, the author indulges in a detailed enumeration of the items on the menu of a Russian restaurant in Paris. Foods are generally representative of a culture, especially in a situation that takes place in an ethnic restaurant, the very purpose of which is to introduce foreign and exotic items to the local setting. In this context, Chandler does not translate the names of Russian dishes and drinks and this allows him to preserve the foreignness of the foods for his readers, their foreignness to the Parisian setting of the story, and their familiarity and closeness to the main character who chooses them from the menu. Chandler uses “zubrovka” (179), “bliny,”
“borsch,” and “shashlyk à la Kars” (180), and “rassolnik” (181) — all terms he explains in endnotes. Some of these names, especially “borsch,” may no longer be so foreign to Western readers and therefore do not create any unnecessary confusion; still, choosing “bliny” instead of “pancakes” or “crêpes,” “shashlyk” instead of “kebab,” and “rassolnik” instead of an easily understandable term such as “pickle soup,” gives English-speaking readers a taste of a foreign cuisine. Ultimately, Chandler’s decision to keep the original words may be the only way to transfer the peculiar Russian flavor of these foods. After all, what culture does not have pancakes or its own variety of soup? Chandler’s translation captures more nuances than just gastronomy, however. When Olga Aleksandrovna describes to the main character her life in Paris, she mentions the feelings of sadness and longing that overcome her on rainy nights. The word that Bunin uses to sum up such feelings is “тоска,” a Russian word that has connotations of ennui, nostalgia, and moodiness, but that above all else has since Pushkin’s time become the signature attribute of literary representations of the Russian mentality. This word was also a staple of the Russian immigrant culture of the turn of the twentieth century, reminiscent of such artists in exile as Alexander Vertinsky. Chandler shows remarkable sensitivity to these aspects of the word by leaving it untranslated; foreignness is the key to the situation and the word “тоска” (183) reminds readers that both characters are foreigners in Paris, preserves all the many intricate connotations of the word, and allows for its precise meaning to be easily guessed from the context of the situation.

Other translators show similar awareness of the subtleties of some seemingly easily translatable Russian words. In their translation of Shukshin’s “In the Autumn,” John Givens and Laura Michael use the word “bazaar” (340) instead of a more obvious choice, “market,” and “muzhik” (341) instead of a simple “man” or “fellow.” At first glance, these choices may seem unusual. They reveal, however, the translators’ knowledge and understanding of Shukshin and his worldview and help readers develop an appreciation for his style as well. Shukshin is known for his emphasis on the people and culture of the Russian countryside, which is probably one of the reasons why Chandler refers to him as a “folk storyteller” in the introduction to this story. Many of Shushkin’s word choices are specifically used in the countryside as opposed to the city, and this is precisely the case with the words left in Russian by Givens and Michael. While markets are common throughout Russia, “bazaar” is the word most commonly used for them in rural areas. Similarly, the word “muzhik” has additional connotations of a peasant, a simple man, and, contextually, a villager. Though it can be translated neutrally as “man,” “fellow,” “guy,” etc., these English words would not transfer the connotations discussed above, which are especially important as markers of Shukshin’s aesthetic perspective. Under these circumstances, keeping the original Russian words is an understandable, insightful, and successful strategy.

Direct speech, especially artistic representations of dialect and illiteracy, constitutes another difficulty for translators. Turgenev’s “The Knocking,” for example, operates on the contrast between the speech of the educated, upper-class narrator and that of the peasant Filofey. The latter’s speech has several peculiar characteristics in the Russian text. Following the provincial usage, Filofey drops or changes the suffixes and endings of many words and at times swallows not only the endings but also the beginning syllables of words. In his translation of the story, Martin Dewhirst transfers the character’s tendency to swallow parts of words into English by making Filofey drop the “h”-sound in the words starting with it. Dewhirst also keeps Turgenev’s short, fragmented sentences when translating Filofey’s speech but does not add more grammatical or phonetic oddities to the silencing of the initial “h.” By keeping this usage consistent throughout the story, Dewhirst manages both to recreate Filofey’s dialect and
to avoid belittling the character by overemphasizing his illiteracy or unintentionally turning Filofey into a comedic figure. Only once does the translator break the pattern and forget to drop the “h” in the beginning of the word “he”: when Filofey says, “A real card, isn’t he? (78)”

Unlike Turgenev, Dovlatov does intend the comic effect in his story “The Officer’s Belt,” when he has Churilin use the word “эффект” instead of the appropriate “аффект.” The two words are often confused and are a textbook example of incorrect usage, a common mistake not necessarily of uneducated but definitely of careless, inattentive speakers. In her translation, Joanne Turnbull successfully transfers this pun by having Churilin say “affluence” instead of “influence” (368). Just as in the original, the two words in this pun differ only by their initial letters, and Churilin’s mistake creates the same effect in English as it does in Russian: it makes the character of the bully and drunkard more sympathetic by making the reader smile at him.

Translating idioms, proverbs, and pearls of folk wisdom are even trickier than recreating substandard speech; the former are found in most of the stories in this collection and different translators demonstrate different ways of handling them. In “The Greatcoat,” the coworkers of Bashmachkin joke about the hero’s diligence, saying that all he got as a reward for his hard work was “петлицу в петлицу да нажил геморрой в поясницу.” This joke is based on the rhyming of the words “петлицу” and “поясницу.” Recreating the rhyme in English is more difficult, yet Chandler comes up with an effective alternative: he lets go of the rhyme altogether and turns the joke into a pun. He translates the expression as “a badge for his buttonhole and a hemorrhoid for his butt” (41), thus preserving the meaning and the offensiveness of the joke. Other stories require the opposite strategy, adding rhyme and meter in order to indicate that the expression is a part of the popular tradition. In Babel’s “Salt,” the narrator describes the station of Fastov as “тридевять земель, в некотором государстве, на неведомом пространстве, я там, конечно, был, самогон-пиво пил, усы обмочил, в рот не заскочило.” This is Babel’s variation of a popular storytelling formula familiar to most Russians from folktales and legends. It does rhyme, but even more important here are the easily recognizable traditional rhythm and meter. In Chandler’s translation, both the rhythm and meter are accurately transferred: “neither here nor there, miles from anywhere, but where we drank beer and felt good cheer” (242), a rendition that frames the precise meaning of the situation in the meter with which it has long been associated. Another example of such a strategy is Leskov’s “The Steel Flea,” a story based entirely on an imitation of folk storytelling. In such a work, it becomes especially important to distinguish between the imitation and a piece of authentic tradition, such as the popular proverb “утро ночи мудренее” used by the character Platov. William Edgerton translates this saying as “wait until the morning light; it’s always wiser than the night” (109). The rhyme creates here a proverb identical in meaning to the original expression, but the rhyme also brings the proverb closer to the folk poetics and song discussed by Chandler in his introduction. Hence the rhyme serves as a hint for the reader to look beyond the character’s own manner of expression; after all, Platov is extremely grounded and by no means does he normally speak in verse.

Apart from this example, Leskov’s story and Edgerton’s translation of it deserve closer attention. Adopting the skaz form for his story, Leskov follows folk etymology and usage for most words and expressions borrowed from other languages, especially those relatively new to Russian during his time. Rendering some of these modified Russian words into English can at times be pretty literal. When Leskov writes, for example, “нимфузория” instead of “инфузория” and “нитроскоп” instead of “микроскоп,” Edgerton accordingly uses the self-inviting “nymphusorias” instead of the correct English form, “infusoria,” and
“nitroscope” instead of “microscope” (111–112). Yet most of Leskov’s words are much more challenging for the translator. At the very start of the story, the Emperor Aleksandr and Platov look at the famous statue, Apollo Belvedere, which Leskov, imitating the mistaken popular usage, refers to as “Аболон Полведерский.” The name is distorted not simply as a result of illiteracy; it does convey a meaning: it literally means “half-a-bucket.” Edgerton translates the joke by turning “Belvedere” into “Velvet Ear” (109), a title as nonsensical as the original Russian word but similar enough to the correct word, “Belvedere.” This strategy is successful, for the “half-a-bucket” reference would carry no humorous connotations in English. If anything, the reference would only be confusing, but following the sound imitation of the original instead of the precise meaning, accurately recreates the effect of the situation found in Leskov’s text. On the same page, Edgerton handles an even more complicated reference, or rather intended mis-reference, of Leskov’s narrator.

When Platov tells the Emperor that he is not impressed with the statue, he says that he admires the Russian soldiers more because they defeated “дванадесять язык.” Given the situation — the Emperor’s role in the Council of Vienna following Napoleon’s defeat — and the clear association of “twelve” (дванадесять) with the war of 1812, the reference is obvious to Russian readers but would be confusing for non-Russian ones. Edgerton turns the humorous, grammatically substandard reference to the year into an equally funny proper name: “the old Bony Part.” The connection with Napoleon is made clear and the humor of the situation is fully transferred into English. Edgerton uses this strategy throughout his translation of the story. For instance, he translates Leskov’s “тугамент” — a pun on the correct “документ” — as “grasp port” instead of “passport” (122), carrying over into English both the exact meaning of the document and the folk interpretation of the new and unfamiliar foreign word. Elsewhere, Edgerton translates the “Твердиземное море” (a misnomer for the “Средиземное море”) as the “Mediterranean Sea” (131), again accurately transferring the pun into English. As a final example, he turns the original “плезирная трубка,” a folk spin on the medical “кистирная трубка” meaning “enema,” into a “public enema” 135, thus preserving both the medical meaning of the expression and recreating the joke for the English-speaking audience by adding the word “public” to it. By using this strategy, Edgerton successfully captures Leskov’s tone and voice, the most notable features of his writing.

Overall, Chandler’s anthology provides the reader with a careful selection of stories that represent the best of Russian writing of different historical periods, styles, and movements. This collection paints a rather comprehensive picture of the history of Russian short fiction and of Russian history as expressed through literature. The works of multiple translators included in the anthology do justice to the original Russian texts. Even more interestingly, they show the many challenges these texts pose for the translator and the many ways in which different translators handle those challenges. In addition, the editor’s choice to include both American and British translators adds to the variety of solutions that were used. Russian Short Stories from Pushkin to Buida will thus be valuable both to general audiences for the material it contains and to experts in Russian language and literature for showing the diverse methodologies used to deliver that material.


Linda Britt, Reviewer

According to “Truth, Lies, and Other Inventions: An Autobiography,” Brianda
Domécq is the daughter of a Spanish father and an American mother, was born in New York, lived the first several years of her life in the United States, did not in fact speak Spanish until her family moved to Mexico when she was nine years old, spent another two years in boarding school in Massachusetts, and began her writing studies at an American university.

All this is a preface to saying that, when Domécq entrusted her novels and short stories written in Spanish to Kayla García, she must have had tremendous confidence in her translator’s linguistic prowess. In reading When I Was a Horse, it is easy to see that her confidence was justified. The prose in English flows easily, as if there were no translation involved. That García accomplishes this while still retaining much of the rhythm of the original Spanish is impressive indeed.

When I Was a Horse is a collection of stories that come from four separate Domécq texts: Bestiario doméstico (1982); Acechando al unicornio (1988); De cuerpo entero (1991); and Un día fui caballo (2000). García does not mention in the introduction why she chose these particular stories or why she chose not to include others. Her introduction to the collection focuses on Domécq’s literary trajectory and her biography. This is useful information, to be sure, but not particularly enlightening in terms of tracing a thematic thread through the collection.

Most (but not all) of the stories have female narrators; most (but not all) of the stories have female protagonists. García certainly highlights Domécq’s feminist leanings and some of the stories she has chosen to include examine, humorously or ironically, women’s roles in society. Beatrice, the protagonist of “The Eternal Theater,” for example, explains that “a woman has to choose, while a man can enjoy both family and profession” (23).¹ Beatrice thus chooses the life of an actress, spurning domestic bliss in favor of her audience’s acclamation. Yet in the end, following a long, successful run on stage, she finds herself crying bitterly, envious of the younger actress who played her daughter and now has taken over her starring role. What remains unsaid is that perhaps Beatrice is also crying over the choice she had defended to her mother years before: “I’ll just avoid the vicious circle of getting married to have a daughter who gets married to have a daughter” (23).

Another story, “Adelaide’s Body,” seems also to fall squarely within the feminist tradition. Adelaide meets a carpet layer when he comes to her apartment for a job. Plot aside, this story provides a fine example of García’s facility with this translation. As the opening of the story demonstrates, García’s English is Spanish transformed smoothly and without a hint of awkwardness:

El día que llegó el colocador de alfombras, Adelaida conoció su Destino. El era bajito, flaquito, desguanzadito, pelirrojo, barbón y muy macho. Mientras tejía un enjambre de suaves palabras color de rosa alrededor de las bellezas de Adelaida, colocó la alfombra, y luego, colocó a Adelaida sobre la misma alfombra.²

The day the carpet layer arrived, Adelaide met her Destiny. He was short, skinny, disheveled, and very macho. He had red hair and a beard. As he wove a net of smooth, beguiling words around Adelaide’s beauty, he laid the carpet, and then he laid Adelaide herself on the carpet. (36)

García does not translate the passage word for word; instead, she rewrites it, keeping the order of things that work and altering slightly other phrases to ensure effortless reading.

When I Was a Horse is García’s third translation of one of Domécq’s works. Eleven Days, a fictionalized account of Domécq’s own experience as a kidnapping victim, was published in 1995 and The Astonishing Story of the Saint of Cabora, another reality-based novel, appeared in 1998. In her introduction, García situates Domécq’s novels and stories within the context of her feminist interpretation of Domécq’s life. This context includes the autobiographical nature of much of Domécq’s fiction, which is acknowledged by the author.
herself: “The story...is extremely autobiographical. I think all literature is, basically, because if you are to touch others you have to touch yourself first, you have to write from that deep feeling, that deep essence that is part of your life’s experience” (6).

The story that leads off the collection, “Mr. Clunk!”, certainly fits into the autobiographical category. The narrator laments his name: “I live behind, below, and a little to the left of my name...I carry my name on my back, and believe me, it’s heavy” (15). Brianda Domecq is the daughter of Spanish winemaker Pedro Domecq and apparently found the name somewhat burdensome, not just because her American schoolteachers found it impossible to pronounce. García’s use of the subject pronoun “I”, capitalized in only one paragraph when, for a brief interlude in his life, the narrator seems to discover his own identity apart from his name, is effective. So is her choice of names for Mr. Clunk’s bride: “Donna Dumpworth.” Brianda Domecq never shed her own name, in spite of her later protestations that it was a burden for her. Nor did “Mr. Clunk” get rid of his, though the possibility of his doing so is left open: “One of these days...I’ll leave the accursed name hanging there on the door and without thinking twice, leap out the window. Then we’ll see what the damn fool does without me” (21).

Other stories deal with (mostly repressed) sexuality and the traditional roles of women in Mexican society. “Mozart Day” relates the story of a young housewife, Mariana, whose entire existence has centered around providing a perfect cocoon of tranquility, a “chrysalis of light and warmth” (86) for her husband and herself. This work, one of the more lyrical stories in the collection, displays a slight touch of magical realism and offers clues early on to its nature:

Her delicate sensitivity, accustomed as it was to avoiding all unpleasanties including the thorns of roses, pricked its finger and bled bitterly. She watched as the thin thread of blood oozed over the surface of her happiness, relentlessly stained her complacent innocence, made obscene little drawings on the surface of her plenitude and headed straight for the front door of the house, seeped out onto the street, and finally trickled into the sewer, mixing with all the shit of the world. It was eleven in the morning. (83)

The feminist nature of “Mozart Day” is hardly subtle, unlike the language of García’s translation. Her choice of alliterative combination and her decision not to shorten Domecq’s sentences makes the prose in English flow smoothly but still without jeopardizing the slightly foreign flavor of the narrative. When Francisco, Mariana’s husband, thus interrupts the narrative flow to interject his interpretation of the problem that has disturbed Mariana’s glowing cocoon, the prose and the message are about as subtle as a tank: “Struck with hard, cold amazement, Francisco realized that things were worse than serious and possibly even irremediable. Mariana was thinking!” (86). Once the thinking has started, of course, it is only a matter of time (three days) before Mariana leaves her household, and her husband, forever.

Another ironically feminist story (if it is a story) is “In Memoriam,” a tale of how the narrator lost her virginity. In spite of the title, there is very little nostalgia for what was lost. There is, however, much speculation about women’s complicity in the game of seduction that often leads to the momentous occasion. The first paragraph refers to a mysterious item that was lost and never recovered, an item apparently without tremendous value: “Frankly, it wasn’t any good to me before or afterward” (91). The narrator’s beau was named John, she was eighteen, and they believed it time “to cast off fears and shame and become adults” (92). Yet once the decision was made, there was no adult acceptance of responsibility. Instead, the narrator takes present-day comfort in postulating that women “have the innate ability to feel ourselves seduced beyond our power of resistance at the slightest provocation, or to commit an act of free will without assuming any responsibility
for it” (92). For her, and by extension, for all women, “it’s a question of survival” (92). Few feminists of today would consider this a declaration of emancipation; for the time and place of the story (Mexico, 1988), however, García finds Domecq’s work revolutionary. She considers the narrator “disillusioned by the inconsequential nature of the act of losing her virginity” (7). The story concludes with the following lines: “I’m not a virgin any more. I waited. Nothing. No change, no emotion, no euphoria, not even guilt. I shrugged my shoulders, put on my bathing suit, and went for a swim” (96).

More extensive, and more daring, is a trilogy of stories from Bestiario doméstico based on a myth, legend, or, according to García, the “real story.” “Lillith,” “Sammaël,” and “Sammaël and Lillith” follow the story of the Biblical Adam’s first wife (before Eve), whose independent nature irks Adam and leads to a rupture in the peace of Eden. In Domecq’s creation story, God “created human beings in his image and He created them male and female united back to back so they would be equal and of the same material. He named the male Adam and the female Lillith” (46). Again, the translation reads as if the translation stage had been skipped, with prose so smooth and natural that one can forget that the original text was in Spanish.

Other stories in the collection explore family rifts and the supernatural (“Of Cheese and Christ”), a family pet’s erotic obsession (“Balzac”), an unrequited first love recalled (“Earl”), an anthropomorphic snake (“The Judas Tail”), the sale of sea-turtle eggs (“Turtle”), a Jaguar spirit-guide (“The Jaguar”), a forbidden flower (“The Provocation”), a husband’s addiction to television (“A Brief Exercise in the Absurd”), a songbird’s violence (“Galatea”), and childhood nostalgia (“When I Was a Horse”).

“When I Was a Horse” is the title story of this collection (and of another, Un día fui caballo, when the story was originally published in 2000) and represents more than a trip down memory lane for the narrator. She describes a playground game where her group of girlfriends pretended to be horses, while several boys played cowboy and attempted to lasso and tame them. As she says, “as a horse, I was unbelievably happy” (156). One day the play got out of hand and turned to humiliation when she was caught by the boys after the bell rang and “I felt a pair of hands yanking my shorts and underpants down to my knees…I was filled with deep shame and the desperate need to disappear, or die” (157). Following this incident the horse-playing ended: “All that is left is a flickering memory filled with nostalgia of the days when I was a horse” (158).

The title, in Spanish, is more telling than the English, which reads like an A.A. Milne title (When We Were Very Young). A literal translation reads “One day I was a horse.” The preterite verb tense (“fui”) is very precise in Spanish; rather than indicating a nebulous “used to be” time frame, it clearly delineates that moment when the pretending stopped. In other words, “one day I was a horse; the next day, I was not.” The child lost her innocence the day she could no longer be a horse. This observation is not to suggest that “When I Was a Horse” is not a reasonable title for the collection (and one likely to sell books). It does perhaps suggest that a nuance was missed.

Yet this is a small complaint within the overall context of García’s fine translation. Domecq is an author worthy of translation and Kayla García has certainly done her work justice. One could find fault with the selection of stories; a few of them are slight or even trite. Still, Domecq is an important female voice in contemporary Mexican literature and García should be commended for making her work accessible — and quite admirably so — to a wider audience.
Alicia Steimberg’s La Selva is a messy conglomerate of fragmented thoughts and memories held together loosely by a thread that spirals, doubles back, and zigzags its way through the profound and mysterious abyss of the human mind. As its Spanish name implies, La Selva is an untamed wilderness of psychological chaos and contains none of the straightforward pleasantries one might expect from a relatively short book entitled in English The Rainforest. Yet herein is encountered what I believe to be the first (and most significant) crime that translator Andrea G. Labinger commits against Steimberg’s newest novel.

It is true that the novel’s protagonist, Cecilia, is undergoing treatment in a health-spa resort that happens to be tucked neatly within the Brazilian rainforest. The novel’s opening paragraph describes this tropical paradise with lyrical simplicity:

I’m in the rainforest, and it’s very hot and humid; at times a warm drizzle falls. Eyes closed, I lift my face to catch the water and drink a little, while a steel-blue and cadmium-yellow macaw watches me without turning its head. This is how I spend my days, among charming monkeys, benevolent serpents, motionless parrots, and foliage that enfolds me. With each step I take, flower-laden branches envelop me. I’d gladly remain here, tasting raindrops and picking the occasional fruit from the lowest branches. The fruit resembles chirimoyas, mangos, bananas.

After the first few pages, however, as the reader begins to delve deeper into Cecilia’s cluttered psyche — thoughts about a drug-addicted son, feelings of her own inability to cope with the turbulence of her life, flashbacks about her dying husband, and very random, almost nonsensical observations about the world — it starts becoming clear that the true setting of this story is not Brazil or even Cecilia’s homeland of Argentina. Instead, the entire novel takes place within the walls of Cecilia’s mind, and it is this psychological jungle to which the title refers.

In Spanish, the double entendre is clear. The term “selva” (as opposed to “selva tropical”) literally means a place of dense vegetation that is sparsely populated, while figuratively it can refer to insanity, confusion, or the absence of civilization. Unfortunately, the term “rainforest” immediately loses that negative connotation, conjuring up instead a scenic image of lush foliage, exotic fauna, and tranquil quietude in a harmonious sea of greens. It’s a beautiful word — comforting, spiritual, dreamy, and strong — but completely at odds with the content of Steimberg’s La Selva.

It is surprising that Labinger, who also translated Steimberg’s Cuando digo Magdalena (Planeta 1992) and is obviously familiar with this author’s unconventional style of writing, would make a careless error of such magnitude. In her introduction to The Rainforest, Labinger talks at length about Steimberg’s former works and her tendency to incorporate “an array of intelligently nuanced characters, a concern with transcendence, and [her] typical, well-honed sense of the absurd.” Yet Labinger fails to discuss her own personal experiences with the translation process, and so the reader is left to question the motives behind her decisions. The only explanation she gives with regard to the title is that “the benevolent rainforest symbolically [represents] an oasis of controlled excitement and carefully choreographed leaps of faith.” The problem with this interpretation is that it completely belittles Cecilia’s internal turmoil — the substantive force behind the entire work — and
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does not allow the reader to explore the negative connections between the original title and the text.

Despite the significance of mistranslating the title, Labinger’s translation of the main text is successful in retaining the content of the original. The randomness of Cecilia’s thoughts is preserved, as are the absurdities of her actions and the pointlessness of her ramblings. The reader becomes thus equally annoyed by Cecilia’s decisions in the original as well as in the translation. An important difference is evident, however: in the original, these seemingly non-related thoughts and episodes flow together seamlessly to form a rhythmical stream of consciousness that allows the reader to see Cecilia as a real human being; in Labinger’s translation, the events are presented in a much more fragmented manner — a pile of tangled odds and ends — that lacks the sort of three-dimensional “realness” of the original. In many parts, the translation is flat and detached, reading very much like a literal, rather than literary, translation:

Federico, who was old enough to be a senior but who was repeating his sophomore year after having repeated his freshman year as well, and who therefore had already spent four years in high school, was always on the verge of being expelled for truancy. I had been struggling with his behavior problems, which for years were attributed to adolescence, that time of life when young people are afflicted with a kind of physiological insanity, leaving their parents perplexed and unable to find explanations or useful advice in child-rearing texts... In passages such as this, the syntax is sloppy, there are too many modifying phrases, and one suspects that the translator did not spend an adequate amount of time developing a proper correlation in English. In other passages, the dialogue seems flat and therefore lacks authenticity:

“Does my darling believe in God?” he once asked me.

“I believe in the God of the holy images.”

“What’s that?” he asked.

“Didn’t my darling ever see a holy image?” I asked in turn, echoing his awkwardly formal tone. “I know they still exist. Not too long ago, when I was in Naples with Tomás, who had gone there for a few days to do some research on San Gaetano, someone gave me one. Holy images are little laminated pieces of cardboard on which God frequently appears. There are also holy images of the Virgin and the saints. But God shows up in lots of them, and that’s how you can tell He exists: He’s in the images, in Renaissance paintings, in Bach chorales. He exists.”

At other times, Labinger’s extended sentence fragments, with their multiple clauses, force the reader to stop and re-read a passage, mentally diagramming its structure in search of its non-existent predicate:

It’s a matter of smiling discreetly while the people who’ve requested appointments present their projects, and it’s a foregone conclusion that the government has no money to finance them. Conversing casually with ambassadors, with ministers; forgetting about one’s own family saga of embarrassing paupers who came to America; and evoking a mythical, splendidous past back in Europe.

There are several cases of interminably (and unnecessarily) long sentences, such as the following one:

At some of our gatherings, very late at night, when the entire campus slept and only the boozy writers who represented the world were still awake, singing songs of their countries, he sang the songs of the Spanish Civil War, and he sang the Internationale while thrusting his fist into the air, and those of us who could joined in.
There are also cases involving shorter sentences that do not make as much sense as they could:

There was a mattress for my yoga practice, a chaise longue for stretching out to read on warm days, drowse and later return to my poor old typewriter to write.

In addition, although Labinger does a fairly good job of mimicking Steinberg’s informal, day-to-day speech patterns, especially within the expository and reflective passages, she sometimes creates an imbalance of tone by tossing words such as “corpulence,” “stupefaction,” and “antimacassars” into the same mix as “comfy,” “grandmas,” and “cat piss.”

To be fair, it must be noted that none of the previous examples significantly hinders the reader’s ability to decipher the text, and while these translations are not as smooth as one might expect, the fact remains that they are technically accurate. Nevertheless, The Rainforest contains a few instances in which the accuracy of the translation is questionable.

In a passage about a supply boat traveling on a river, Labinger refers to the “owner propelling his old launch along with a single oar.” Although the term “launch” can describe a large, open motorboat, this is not quite the image projected here by the Spanish “lancha” nor is the English term commonly used in this way by modern standards. Labinger could have easily clarified any confusion by using a more accurate and easily recognized term.

In another passage, Cecilia is looking through the newspaper classifieds and Labinger uses the term “categories” where perhaps the term “headings” might have been more appropriate, especially as the Spanish seems to be a reference to the line in bold that precedes each individual advertisement:


Female lawyer, 5’6”, brunette, green eyes, feminine, athletic, and independent, looking for a serious relationship. An agency called Just Love offered Hebrew Introductions, offering VIP types, warmth, and status. I went on to the next category: Companions. I immediately thought of the therapeutic companion from my last days with Federico, but a single glance at the ads made me smile. They offered:

April, a Paraguayan goddess, twenty-two, passionate and “all woman.”

Despite the many instances in which I believe Labinger’s translation is in need of improvement, I am also of the opinion that much of its weakness stems from the fact that Steinberg’s original is itself lacking in quality and purpose, although parts of it are nothing less than brilliant (in both the original and this translation). The description of Federico’s friends, for example, reverberates with visual detail and personality:

They were two slovenly-looking fat girls with greasy hair and swollen eyes, dressed in stained sweatsuits and shabby sneakers with untied shoelaces. It wasn’t that sort of deliberate negligence some adolescents affect (those exorbitant, torn, holey jeans you see in shop windows): the girls’ carelessness was far from whimsical; it was pure sloppiness and filth.

Both Steinberg and Labinger show tremendous promise in their respective careers, and I look forward to their future projects.

Notes

1 Domecq, Brianda. When I Was a Horse. Trans. Kayla S. García. Fort Worth: TCU Press, 2006. All references to and quotes from the translation are indicated by the page numbers within parentheses following the passages.

El Zarco’s exciting and romantic story with real-life characters, allegorical melodrama of a high order, marries passion and politics, democracy and desire in a noble cross-breed love affair between the Indian hero and his mestiza heroine, pitched against the disastrous pairing of a fair-skinned girl blinded by the blue-eyed thief, el Zarco, and by her hatred for Indians. These loves in turn are set against the turbulent times in Mexico when bands of thieves controlled the countryside and even joined forces with the national army against French forces. For an understanding of Mexico, for an appreciation of its character emerging in the 19th century, El Zarco is thrillingly indispensable, while maestro Altamirano, a patriotic institution in Mexico, embodies the rare combination of a full-blooded Indian, active warrior, crusading legislator, teacher, and inspiring writer, who devoted himself to cultivating young writers in hopes of developing a national literature to speak across political and racial lines and establish a truly indigenous culture. I teach El Zarco with pleasure in my classes and I strongly recommend this foundational novel to teachers and students, to readers of all sorts, especially in Ronald Christ’s respectful and elegant translation based on Manuel Sol’s definitive edition.

—Doris Sommer, Harvard University

El Zarco, The Blue-eyed Bandit will steal readers’ hearts. Nineteenth-century Mexico comes alive in this elegantly crafted melodrama, a bridge to understanding the period’s traditional gender roles, its stark moral divides, and, particularly, its harsh racial hierarchies. Ignacio Altamirano was one of several Latin American novelists who escaped the ideological grip of scientific racism long before the region’s essayists and scientists could do so. Novelist did not have to disprove prevailing racist notions in order to escape them in fiction. They could create characters who defied racial stereotypes, appealing to their readers to recognize the truth of their depictions despite the pronouncements of prestigious European white supremacists. Altamirano’s novel provides a paradigmatic example, made wonderfully accessible by Christ’s translation and Conway’s introduction. Not to be missed!

—John Charles Chasteen, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill

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