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Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature, Volume 54, 2008, pp.  
137-143 (Article)

Published by University of Toronto Press



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# THE LITERARY TRANSLATOR'S MANY WAYS OF BEING FAITHFUL

*Margaret Jull Costa*

Translation is often spoken of as if it were a process separate from original writing, as though it were not quite the real thing, but a kind of copycat art. My view is that a translation is more like a re-writing of a text and that a good translator, as well as knowing the language of the text, must also be a good creative writer in his or her own right. Having said that, creating a translation is clearly not the same as creating an original piece of writing, in that the translator starts not with a blank page, but with someone else's words and ideas in another language. And then there is the matter of faithfulness. Somehow, while writing in an entirely different language, the translator has to remain faithful to the original, to transport it heart and soul into an alien setting and make it seem entirely at home there.

For me, being a faithful translator is bound up with the whole laborious process of translation itself. I begin by producing a good first draft that becomes much more honed and careful in second and third drafts. This evolving text initially requires a close reading of my first draft against the original text, and then I read, re-read and re-edit both on paper and on screen. I also read the text out loud to myself because this highlights any faulty cadences in a sentence, brings to light any irksome repetitions that should not be there, any stiffness. It helps, too, in 'hearing' the text, in getting a feel for the authorial voice. Where there are oddities I go back to the original to check that I really have understood what the author meant. Sometimes all that's required for a sentence to come alive is to change one word. In dialogues I have to keep asking myself: "Is this what the character would say if the character were speaking an equivalent English?" With the narrative voice, I have to keep checking that the tone and register are right. Of course, over-familiarity with a text can breed its own problems, so I try all the time to creep up on my translation and read it as if I hadn't read it before, often leaving it to one

side for some days – or, ideally, weeks - in order to make ‘surprise’ more likely. Ultimately—at final draft stage—I need someone else to read it, simply because I am too close to it. All this is part of the odd but necessary process of getting a sufficient distance from the original text and the original language in order for this new text, my translation, to be a vital text in its own English right, while, paradoxically, still remaining true to the original. It is only by the fourth or fifth draft that I sense this mysterious process is happening. It is often only then that I get a feeling for the book as a whole in English. This—possibly obsessive—re-drafting and re-editing, usually nine or ten times, is, for me, part of the process of re-imagining, that is, of re-creating, the text in the new language.

In this sense, translation sometimes seems to me like creative writing in reverse. The act of writing for the original writer often begins as a largely intuitive process that becomes progressively more conscious, whereas translation starts as a more conscious activity—transforming someone else’s words into equivalent words in another language—and moves on to acquire an intuitive authority. If the translation is to have a life of its own, the translator must allow the text being translated to become part of her own imaginative life, of her own imaginative furniture. The translation has to have a voice of its own, just as the original does. A translator cannot be a neutral conduit through which language passes. The best translations have the stamp of individuality on them, but a dual individuality: that of author and translator. A good literary translation should have a new personality composed of those two individuals.

A pianist interpreting Mozart is clearly not Mozart, and no one expects that. The listeners are interested in both the interpretation and the quality of his or her playing. If the performance is a good one, inevitably and properly, the personality of the musician will come through. The same could be said of acting. Simon Callow has written:

One of the paradoxes of acting is that in order to play another person, you have to be very in touch with yourself. You have to be the starting point; the end result, too, has to be as much you as the character. The good actor has the ability to absorb another personality and to recreate it in or through the medium of his or her own personality.

Much of this applies to translators. The more the translator brings to a text of his or her own personality and experience, the more successful will be the interpretation, the more vital and the more convincing. This doesn’t mean imposing your own style on the text you’re translating, but being very sensitive to register, tone, vocabulary and voice and being able to hear and read those things in one language and transpose and transform them into another.

I thought the best way to illustrate what I do and what I mean by being faithful, would be to give a few examples taken from some of the books I’ve worked on over the last twenty years.

The first is from *The Book of Disquiet* by Fernando Pessoa. For those of you unfamiliar with Pessoa, he was born in 1888 and died in 1935. He published little during his lifetime, but, after his death, a trunk full of papers was found in his room. He mainly wrote poetry, but this is one of his prose works. It is made up of fragments written or typed on various bits of paper over a period of twenty-three

years. Pessoa scribbled the title *Livro do dessassossego* on some of these scraps, but never put them together himself in any formal way. In fact it wasn't published as a book in Portuguese until 1982, 47 years after his death.

The work of deciphering and collating the material was carried out by Maria Aliete Galhoz, Teresa Sobral Cunha and Jacinto do Prado Coelho. More recently, Richard Zenith published what is probably the first complete version. However, since there is no 'official' version, this means that in each edition—in Portuguese and in other languages—the texts appear in a different order. In English alone, there are four different editions.

I chose the following extract pretty much at random:

**Original:**

*Nos meus parques, somno **morto**, a somnolencia dos tanques ao sol-alto, quando os rumores dos insectos chusmam na hora e me pesa viver, não como uma magoa, mas como uma dor física por concluir.*

*Palácios muito longe, parques absortos, a estreiteza das aleas ao longe, a graça **morta** dos bancos de pedra para os que foram—pompas **mortas**, graça desfeita, ouropel perdido. Meu anseio que esqueço, quem me dera recuperar a magoa com que te sonhei.*

**My translation:**

A **heavy** sleep fills my gardens, pools lie somnolent beneath the noonday sun, the noise of insects throngs the hour and life weighs on me, not like a grief, but like an unending physical ache.

Distant palaces, dreaming parks, the narrow lines of avenues far off, the **graveyard** grace of the stone benches built for those who once were—**dead** splendours, ruined elegance, lost baubles. Sweet longing sliding slowly into forgetting, if only I could recover the pain with which I dreamed you.

It's always quite odd looking at a translation one did a long time ago, and it's sometimes hard to reconstruct the thought processes, which, as with any kind of writing, are often quite unconscious or intuitive. When I compare the original and my translation of this passage again, I immediately notice that Pessoa uses *morto* three times and that I translate this as 'dead,' the immediate translation that springs to mind, only once. But then *morto* in the Aurélio dictionary has fifteen distinct senses, and the English word 'dead' does not necessarily carry all those meanings. The translator has to choose, to interpret, to select. "A dead sleep fills my gardens" sounds odd and, yes, dead. What does it mean? What does he mean? I've chosen to translate *morto* here as 'heavy,' the kind of sleep from which one finds it hard to surface. Later, instead of 'dead grace,' I have 'graveyard grace,' which is an even bigger leap: *morto* here carries with it the sense of 'faded,' 'vanished,' 'inert,' 'forgotten,' and my choice of 'graveyard grace'—for the 'grey' sound and the alliteration—is my attempt to convey at least some of that. Finally, I do translate *morto* as 'dead' in 'dead splendours' because that is precisely what they are, and there you need the 'deadness' of 'dead.'

I've also added verbs where there are none in Portuguese and this, again, I think, has to do with rhythm and pace. As I said earlier, I read my translations out

loud to myself, and that's always very telling. I don't want what I write to 'sound like a translation.' I notice that I've translated *parque* as 'garden' when it's first used and as 'park' the second time. The first time it occurs, the sentence seems to demand a two-syllable word, the second time a monosyllable. I've radically expanded the last line—*Meu anseio que esqueço*—which becomes in my English "Sweet longing sliding slowly into forgetting." I don't know that I would go for quite that amount of alliteration if I was translating the same passage now. However, I can see that because the writer is addressing, actually speaking to his *anseio*—his 'yearning' or 'longing' or 'desire,' however you choose to translate that complex word—the English structure has to be adapted to convey that.

As you can see, this short passage demands many decisions from the translator. The two questions that keep coming up are: What does the writer mean? And: How can I say that in English in a way that is true to both meaning and voice? Because all fine writers have a distinctive voice, and a large part of being a translator is hearing that voice and trying to find a voice in your own language that fits it.

The next extract is from Eça de Queiroz's comic novella *The Mandarin*. Eça was born in 1845 and died in 1900 and is one of Portugal's greatest novelists, if not the greatest. He is a consummate stylist. Every sentence is honed. He greatly admired Flaubert and, like him, chose words for connotation and sound and for sheer suggestive power. The translator must try to be as precise as Eça in finding the appropriately resonant word or phrase.

An example. On the first page, Teodoro, the novel's wimpish hero, is describing Sunday afternoons at his boarding-house in the company of his widowed landlady, Dona Augusta, and the other lodger, Lieutenant Couceiro. Teodoro is smoking his pipe and watching as Dona Augusta massages away the Lieutenant's dandruff.

**Original:**

*Esta hora, sobretudo no Verão, era deliciosa: pelas janelas meio cerradas penetrava o **bafo da soalheira**, algum repique distante dos sinos da Conceição Nova e o arrulhar das rolas na veranda; **a monótona sussurração das moscas** balançava-se sobre a velha cambraia, antigo véu nupcial da Madame Marques, que cobria agora no aparador os pratos de cerejas bicais...*

**My translation:**

This was a delightful time of day, especially in summer: the **hot breath of noon** would waft in through the half-open windows along with the distant ringing of the bells of Conceição Nova and the cooing of doves on the verandah, whilst, inside, the **monotonous drone** of flies hovered over the old cambric cloth (formerly Madame Marques' wedding veil) draped over the sideboard to protect the plates of cherries...

I'll just look at the two phrases in bold: *soalheira* is the time of day in summer when the sun is at its most intense; *bafo* is a lovely word meaning both 'breath' and 'a slight gust of wind.' 'Noonday heat' would do for *soalheira*, but you need something that gives a sense of an intense summer heat that hits you like some overheated exhalation; 'hot breath of noon,' I hope, captures all those things, as well as the faintly sleazy sexual undertones of Dona Augusta's head massage.

With the wonderfully onomatopoeic *a monótona sussurração das moscas*

I didn't feel that "the monotonous whispering of the flies" had the same effect in English. 'Whisper' seems the wrong word for what flies do, and 'buzz' too commonplace, whereas 'drone' has both the right sound and an added connotation of idleness, which is perfect for this lazy, languorous scene.

The third extract is from José Saramago (the Nobel Laureate born in 1922 and still going strong). The most striking thing about Saramago's novels is the length of his sentences and the appearance on the page of seamless prose broken up by the occasional paragraph and chapter break. Even the dialogues are punctuated only with commas, and each new utterance signalled by a capital letter. These dialogues are great fun to translate, but it is that last feature that complicates matters for the English translator, because in English, of course, the first person pronoun is always capitalized (unless you're e.e. cummings or a member of the texting generation), and that can lead to difficulty in following the dialogue.

The example I've chosen comes from *The Double* [*O homem duplicado*]. It's part of a dialogue between the protagonist and his own common sense.

**Original:**

*E amanhã, Arranjarei um pretexto para sair cedo, Esse livro, Não sei, talvez o deixe ficar aqui como recordação. O elevador parou no quinto andar; Tertuliano Máximo Afonso perguntou, Vens comigo, Sou o senso comum, aí dentro não há lugar para mim, Então, até a vista, Duvido.*

**Literal translation:**

And tomorrow, **I'll think up** an excuse to leave early, That book, **I don't know**, perhaps I'll leave it here as a souvenir. The lift stopped on the fifth floor, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso asked, Are you coming with me, **I'm** common sense, there's no place for me in there, See you later, then, **I doubt it**.

**My final version:**

And tomorrow, **Tomorrow, I'll think up** an excuse to leave early, And that book, **What this, I'm not sure really**, perhaps I'll leave it here as a souvenir. The lift stopped on the fifth floor, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso asked, Are you coming with me, **No, I'm** common sense, there's no place for me in there, See you later, then, **Oh, I very much doubt that**.

As you can see from the literal translation, if I were sticking very closely to the original, the use of 'I' could be confusing. Sometimes the rhythm of the sentence makes it clear that 'I' must be a response to a statement or question but not always. It could be argued that, as the translator, I'm interfering too much and that my translation would be more faithful if it were more literal, but what my freer, fuller version achieves, I hope, is clarity for the reader (again, I could be accused of spoon-feeding) and the genuine swing of English dialogue.

Saramago loves to play with words. The novel *Ensaio sobre a lucidez* (translated into English as *Seeing*) refers back to his 1995 novel *Ensaio sobre a cegueira* (published in English as *Blindness*), in which a plague of blindness strikes a nation – the blindness is a 'white blindness' [*cegueira branca*] because the people afflicted can see only a milky whiteness. In *Seeing*, a rather different plague is afflicting society, with the electorate going to the ballot boxes, en masse,

to turn in blank ballot papers.

The word *branco* in Portuguese means both ‘blank’ and ‘white,’ but where Portuguese has one word, we have two. There is one particular passage in which the narrator explains how ‘blank’ has become a word to be avoided, and Saramago plays on the word *branco* meaning both ‘blank’ and ‘white.’

**Original:**

*De um folha de papel branco, por exemplo, dizia-se que era desprovida de cor, uma toalha que toda a vida tinha sido branca passou a ser cor de leite, a neve deixou de ser comparada a um manto branco para tornarse na maior carga alvacentas dos últimos anos, os estudantes acabaram com aquilo de dizer que estavam em branco, simplesmente confessavam que não sabiam nada da materia, mas o caso mais interessante de todos foi o súbito desaparecimento da adivinha com que, durante gerações e gerações, pais, avós, tios e vizinhos supuseram estimular a inteligência e a capacidade dedutiva das criancinhas, **Branco é, galinha o põe, e isto aconteceu porque as pessoas, recusando-se a pronunciar a palavra, se aperceberam de que a pergunta era absolutamente disparatada, uma vez que a galinha, qualquer galinha de qualquer raça, nunca conseguirá, por mais que se esforce, pôr outra coisa que não sejam ovo.***

**My translation:**

**A blank piece of paper, for example, would be described as colourless, a blank on a form that had all its life been a blank became the space provided, blank looks all became vacant instead, students stopped saying that their minds had gone blank, and owned up to the fact that they simply knew nothing about the subject, but the most interesting case of all was the sudden disappearance of the riddle with which, for generations and generations, parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles and neighbours had sought to stimulate the intelligence and deductive abilities of children, **You can fill me in, draw me and fire me, what am I, and this happened because people, reluctant to elicit the word blank from innocent children, justified themselves by saying that the riddle was far too difficult for those with limited experience of the world.****

At the beginning of the passage, Saramago describes how people, too afraid to use the word *branco*, speak, for example, of a blank piece of paper as being ‘without colour’ or of a white towel as ‘milk-white,’ or feel they can no longer say that snow looks like a white blanket. The first example works in English, but in the other two cases, English requires the word ‘white,’ not ‘blank,’ which is the word everyone is trying to avoid. So I have had to invent entirely new examples. Then there’s the riddle—in Portuguese this means: “What’s white/blank and laid by a hen?” Again there’s that white/blank conundrum for the translator. I decided to seek inspiration in the wonderful punnability of English, and so jettisoned the chicken and came up with: “You can fill me in, draw me and fire me, what am I?” The askers of the riddle in Portuguese justify their abandonment of it by saying that it’s too easy for children, whereas I have them say that it’s too difficult.

There is a lot of discussion in translation theory circles about ‘domestication’

and ‘foreignization,’ the domesticators being accused of traducing and taming the original so that it fits normal English style, the ‘foreignizers’ claiming that a translation should retain a foreign quality so as to remind the reader of its origins. Personally, I feel that ‘foreignization’ is often an excuse for producing bad, unworked-on translations, and, besides, the whole ‘dichotomy’ seems to me a false one. Sometimes I err on the side of domestication and at others on the side of foreignization, but I always do so with the aim of remaining true to the spirit of the original. In all the instances I’ve given, I’m sure other translators would have made different choices. There can never be a ‘definitive’ translation of a book because each translator brings to it different experiences and different linguistic skills and tastes. Translation is a constant balancing act between being faithful to the spirit and letter of the original and to the language into which one is translating. Sometimes we make it across the high wire and sometimes we fall off.

One of my favourite quotations about translation comes from the translators of the King James version of the Bible. They wrote:

Translation it is that openeth the window, to let in the light; that breaketh the shell, that we may eat the kernel; that putteth aside the curtain, that we may look into the most holy place; that removeth the cover of the well, that we may come by the water.

And it is precisely that ambition, that desire to reveal the truth of a text as a gift to the reader that lies at the heart of being a faithful translator.