

## The Task of the Translator

*'Good translation is not merely translation, for the translator is giving the original through himself, and finding himself through the original.'* – T. S. Eliot

It's barely perceptible but I've noticed that there is often a disdainful pause when you tell someone from another country that you have just read one of their nation's classic works of literature in translation. You are keen to show off your global literary pretensions, when they immediately expose the gulf between the shadowy imitation that you have read and the glorious original that they know and love. 'A *Sentimental Education*?', a Frenchman condescends, 'Ah, yes, you mean Flaubert's *L'Education sentimentale*...'

This gulf of difference, this slippage between languages, is what makes the subject of translation so fascinating, and so bewildering. The English word 'translation' comes from Latin and means literally a 'carrying over' (*trans-ferre*); this meaning is shared by most European languages which vary between 'carrying over', 'crossing over', 'leading over' and 'setting over'. In European literature, these etymologies have firmly established the idea of translation as a bridge between two things, a link between the new form and the old form. But what sort of bridge or link? This is often understood as a kind of equivalency, but can this be achieved? And if so, how can it be measured? Perhaps it doesn't even matter.

In the quote by Eliot above, he makes a distinction between 'mere translation' and 'good translation', pointing to an ancient debate between literal, 'word for word' translation – considered anathema by poets throughout the ages – and translation which mysteriously, perhaps magically, gets to the essence of the subject. The former approach, sometimes described as 'servile' or 'slavish copying', has been seen to espouse a false objectivity, while the latter promotes a subjective response and 'poetic license'.

In the western literary tradition varying degrees of 'poetic license' have become the standard approach to translation. This holds true from Horace or Cicero's interpretations of Greek poetry and myth, or Augustine's early translations of the Bible into Latin, to Dryden and other 18th century poets' attempts to 'English' the classics. As all these examples indicate, there can be no measure of accuracy or proximity to the original; in fact this is often disregarded in favour of the translator's own intentions.

In general translators do not approach a text by translating each word individually, or by imitating the original grammatical structure – instead translation acts a bit more like metaphor or analogy, conveying the spirit of the original, in a kind of parallel version. It is quite common today to find titles of books completely altered – a famous example might be Proust's epic *A La Recherche du Temps Perdu* translated as the well-known phrase

from a Shakespeare sonnet, 'Remembrance of Things Past'. This free translation introduces a new image and conveys something familiar to the English ear which would be lost in the more prosaic (and now also common) translation *In Search of Lost Time*. Many translators wish to introduce new themes and interpretations so that the original can be updated and brought into the cultural sphere of the new reader. In doing so, as Eliot suggests, the translator also discovers and creates something original.

This subjective approach to translation also acknowledges the role of the reader (or viewer, in the case of translation between media), as well as the translator. Free translation reflects the fact that just as the translator introduces new imagery and ideas, so too does the reader, who brings their own experience to bear upon the text or object. Therefore the reader also becomes a kind of translator, interpreting a text in the same way that everything we see, hear and read everyday is filtered through our own subjective lens.

Free translation is also a reminder that the meanings of words, texts or objects cannot be fixed, and that words and images are themselves signs within a complex but arbitrary semiotic system. For example, the word 'bread' does not equal the yeasty wheat food, nor does it equal the words 'brot' (in German) or 'pain' (in French) but has come to stand for them all within an accepted linguistic system. This system makes communication possible but it reveals that the structure of language is fragile. Meaning is approximate and tentative whether it is within a single language, between several languages or indeed from one medium to another.

There can be no doubt that in the spirit of poetic license most writers today would agree that translation from one medium to another is a logical extension of the same principle. In fact there are many precedents for this area of experimentation, not least in the fields of psychology and linguistics which have explored parallels between languages and other modes of expression across the globe. Structural anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss tried to establish that certain myths and beliefs are universal, seeking an equivalency between cultures that reached towards a sort of neo-Platonism. In *Myth and Meaning* (1978) he wrote: 'To try and express in one language, that is, the language of graphic arts and painting, something which also exists in music and in the libretto; that is to try and reach the invariant property of a very complex set of codes (the musical code, the literary code, the artistic code). The problem is to find what is common to all of them. It is a problem, one might say, of translation...'

The search for this common 'code' was also the subject of German writer Walter Benjamin's famous essay, 'The Task of the Translator' (1923). Here he put forward the idea that each work of art or literature has 'an essential quality' that transports it beyond merely conveying information. It is the 'task of the translator' to bring to light this essential quality or hidden meaning, and in doing this the translator breathes new life into the original:

‘In its after-life – which could not be called that if it were not a translation and a renewal of something living – the original undergoes a change...[and] maturing process.’

This change, or metamorphosis, is at the heart of Simon Morley’s translations of books into paintings. For each work, a number of decisions and transactions take place which resemble the conventional linguistic translator’s choice of word, phrase or sentence structure. Firstly, a list of Japanese books, and specific translations of these books in English, were agreed by Morley and the curator; they also undertook to read all the books (if not already read), creating a shared commitment to the project, as well as giving the artist insight into content, as well as form; next, Morley made choices about whether to paint the front cover or the frontispiece (all paintings represent the various frontispieces in the books, except *Kitchen* by Banana Yoshimoto which depicts the cover); and finally he made decisions about the colour of each work (inspired by colours in Hokusai paintings). Listed in this way, the working process seems to represent a logical methodology, a straightforward translation of one thing into another – after all the paintings do actually look like books. And yet, considered in another way, these hybrid objects could not be further from the original books, and the logical choices belie the numerous variables which could also be brought into the equation.

Although Morley may not claim to have cracked the ‘common code’ between literary and artistic forms, or even to have discovered and conveyed the ‘essential quality’ of each original book, these paintings do act as a kind of bridge, a *trans-lation* in the etymological sense. They are a bridge between cultures, both on a personal level for Morley, who has no doubt gained a greater understanding of Japanese culture and literature, as well as for the viewer who, inevitably, reflects upon the relationship between Japanese culture and their own. The works also represent a ‘crossing over’ between different forms of expression, exploring the relationship between visual and verbal forms. This will be particularly true in Japan where the audience, not comprehending the English language, may read the English script simply as visual signs. The occasional combination of Japanese and English script, on the paintings *Wild Geese* and *Kitchen*, also acts as a reminder that language has its origins in pictures and symbols. The Japanese and English pictograms and visual signs cannot ‘equal’ each other; instead they appear to nod at each other in the conscious knowledge that their relationship is approximate, partial, utilitarian.

The essence of translation is mystery, and it this quality that drives forward new experiments – from words to images, from images to sound, from sounds to words and so on, offering a happily indefinable and unmeasurable crossing between cultures, ideas, values, beliefs and dreams.

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