

Thinking through translation

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I want to *think through* the subject of translation itself and to discuss other topics from the perspective of a translator, *to think about them through the medium of translation*.

What is the process we call translation? What is it like and what is it not like? And who is the translator? That is to say, what is the translator's personal role in this process?

You can't think about translation without thinking about what gets translated: language, texts, literary and otherwise. And you also have to think about writers and readers and their intentions. And where there is intention, there, too, is morality. So you have to think about the ethics of translation.

I can imagine someone objecting to the very notion of this book, saying: "Translation is a tedious and trivial activity, and soon computers will be able to do it—which proves my point." Setting aside the question of whether computers actually will be able to translate someday soon, must we concede that if you can design a machine to do something, then it can't be a very interesting activity? No. Chess is a game that machines can play much better than I, but it remains an interesting activity for those who are interested in it.

I realize that is a tautology, but it could be that the very notion of being "interesting" is tautological. Some people are bored by sex, professional basketball, and differential calculus. Conversely, anything might become interesting if you get involved in it. Dentists and insurance agents love their work. I would rather be a translator. Most people wouldn't. Dentists and insurance agents vastly outnumber translators.

Curious people are always interested in other people's work, both the technicalities and the outlook. What do physicians, pilots, paleontologists, or painters know that we don't? How do detectives, drama critics, dentists, or drummers think and see the world? What comparable wisdom can be acquired by considering the craft of translation?

First of all, translation constantly teaches you new things as you do it, partly because you're always working on material you haven't read yet. Also, whenever one translates a new writer, one gains psychological insight into that writer as one responds to the way he or she uses words, organizes information, conveys ideas, and arouses emotions. The opportunity to keep learning makes any craft interesting, and the necessity to learn keeps it challenging. Usually the more knowledge a craft demands, the more it supplies.

One learns from a craft at every stage. In training, one must both acquire knowledge of the materials and processes used in that craft and learn to think like its other practitioners. As one gains practical experience, one hones skills, improves one's performance, and revises one's thinking about the craft.

At the same time, one learns about the world through one's craft. Knowledge of the materials and processes of a craft can be applied to other materials and processes. Skills can be applied in other activities. Knowledge of human relations gained through the craft can be applied elsewhere. Ultimately, the correct practice of a craft should be a path to wisdom.

To be a translator one must possess knowledge and skills different from those of an architect or horticulturist, and work as a translator teaches one different things than work as a psychotherapist or hydraulic engineer. Any professional acquires and applies specialized knowledge. Yet one wonders whether translators can claim to be specialists at all. Their materials are ordinary languages known to millions of people, and the processes they use are reading and writing—hardly specialized skills.

Assuming, for the moment, that translators must acquire and employ some sort of specialized knowledge, then that knowledge concerns the use of language and the creation and interpretation of texts, faculties that we take to define the human species. Hence, if the translator gains particular insights into these faculties, they are, in a sense, insights into a central component of human nature.

Nevertheless, translators are anomalous as writers and readers, and translations have an odd status as texts. Although temperamentally unsympathetic to theoretical models, I do understand that translation poses certain interesting questions for theoreticians of communication. In most linguistic communication there is no translator. When you insert the translator into the model of linguistic communication, are you adding a new element in the chain between speaker and listener? Ignoring factors like codes

and noise and limiting the model to written communication, one could represent that possibility as follows:

Ordinary written communication:

WRITER \Leftrightarrow TEXT \Leftrightarrow READER

Translated written communication:

WRITER \Leftrightarrow TEXT \Leftrightarrow TRANSLATOR \Leftrightarrow TRANSLATED TEXT \Leftrightarrow READER

This seems like an eminently reasonable way of thinking about where translators fit into the model of communication, especially since the segment " \Leftrightarrow TRANSLATOR \Leftrightarrow TRANSLATED TEXT \Leftrightarrow READER" can be in any language except the original language of the text.

However, another way of looking at the writing, reading, and translation of texts would be to say that a "translator" is always present as an element in communication, using the term "translator" metaphorically, to stand for mental processes. Thus we would have a model like this, in which mental processes are bracketed:

WRITER \Leftrightarrow [internal "text" \Leftrightarrow internal "translator"] \Leftrightarrow ["translated"] TEXT
 \Leftrightarrow [internal "translator"] \Leftrightarrow ["translated text"] \Leftrightarrow READER

This model implies that writers "translate" something mental into text and that readers "translate" texts into something mental, an implication that is difficult to handle in any empirical way. It also implies that the translator is doing something explicitly that every reader and writer does implicitly, though in a skewed order.

It does seem that something mental and nonverbal must exist before texts are written and after they are read. When we have written something, we believe we have organized and expressed ideas and impressions that existed in our brains before we wrote, for we might have used other language or another language entirely to express them. Similarly, as readers, we feel that we are storing up ideas and impressions nonverbally, for, after reading, we can express some of these ideas and impressions in our own words,

even in a language other than the one in which the text was written. However, the writer's "internal translator," which converts preverbal material into words is largely inaccessible to us, as is the preverbal material. Similarly, the reader's "internal translator" and the postverbal material it produces are beyond our reach, so it isn't clear how helpful it is to place these mental agents and events in the model.

Here is another way of expressing the role of the translator in a model of writing and reading texts:

WRITER \Leftrightarrow (original) TEXT \Leftrightarrow READER-TRANSLATOR \Leftrightarrow
WRITER-TRANSLATOR \Leftrightarrow [translated] TEXT \Leftrightarrow READER

By looking at the translator's dual role as reader and writer, that is, by looking at reading and writing from the translator's point of view, one can gain interesting empirical insight into these important activities. Theoreticians of communication must consider closely the translator's practical experience in seeking adequate solutions to problems that arise.

For the translator, each job presents new and unexpected problems, and in solving them one learns more about the languages one works with, one improves reading and writing skills, and the content of one's work teaches one a new vocabulary of words and concepts. Translators must master the significance of detail and nuance. They must find the patience to choose the right words and place them in the right order. However, the deepest lesson of translation is the courage to live with uncertainty. When you try to tie down the meaning of words in texts and transmit them intact, you see how little there is to grasp and how slippery are the criteria for success. Nonetheless you proceed.

Metaphors for Translation

Once the reviewer of a novel that I translated from Hebrew accused me of making the text so obscure that she had trouble divining what the writer was up to. This criticism struck me as nasty and unfair. The reviewer could have had no access to the original text, even had she known Hebrew well enough to judge, for the book in question had not yet been published in Hebrew. Without comparing my obscure English to the limpid original, how could the reviewer blame its obscurity on me?

I mention the instance years after the fact not to defend myself, but merely to show how translators are treated unfairly: if the style of the translation is "good," the author gets the praise, if it's "bad," we get the blame. To some extent this is because even sophisticated readers do not always have a clear idea of what translators do.

I have been working as a professional translator since 1979. I became a translator more by chance than by design. I was working in the publications department of a Zionist youth organization, and someone asked me to moonlight and translate a book from Hebrew. That worked out satisfactorily, and I hated my office job, so I decided to take the risk of freelancing as a translator. One assignment led to another, and it has turned out to be a very suitable occupation for a person of my temperament and mental apparatus. In retrospect, when I remember how I wrote out that first translation in longhand and then typed it on a portable electric typewriter, I am astonished at my own patience. If computers had not become readily available for word processing not long after I took up this profession, I would not have lasted long in it.

Initially, as I made the transfer from being a salaried employee to a self-employed professional, I faced the problem of getting work, completing it, figuring out how much I could charge for it, collecting fees, keeping accounts, paying taxes, and all the other things that self-employed professionals need to do, whether they are physicians or fortune tellers.

My business is to provide a certain service to my clients, who may be individuals or institutions, and the type and quality of the service I provide (as well as the fee I charge) depend on my relation to my specific client. For example, a lawyer once hired me to translate a short contract from French between an enormous American computer company and an even larger French industrial concern. Needless to say I charged him considerably more per word than I would have charged an underpaid academic for translating a talk he had to give at a conference abroad. How often does one get a chance to act out a Robin Hood fantasy?

Since I view translation as work that is supposed to provide me with income—not that I expect to get rich this way—I am not

exclusively a literary translator. Though it might be personally rewarding to specialize in that branch, a number of excellent translators from Hebrew have got there before me, and there's a limited amount of literary work.

Freelancers have to take what they can get, and they have to satisfy their clients. Hence I have found myself doing a good deal of academic translation in the fields of history, archeology, Jewish studies, and literary criticism—books about novels rather than novels. This varied experience has taught me that the translation of literature is not radically different from other kinds of translation, and it need not be either less interesting or more difficult.

IS THE TRANSLATOR A CREATIVE ARTIST?

Aside from linguists, the people who commonly reflect about the theoretical difficulties of translation are scholars and critics of literature, who are mainly interested in literary translation. Indeed, when I was a graduate student and university teacher in comparative literature, the subject of translation appeared in a light quite different from that of my present vantage point.

I have come upon the claim that translation is creative work, and that all art is translation. However, it is hard to take this claim seriously. The task of translating a text is patently less creative than the act of writing it, and the translator enjoys much less freedom than the original artist.

The translator's freedom with respect to the text can be compared to the limited freedom allowed to foreign exchange rates by central banks. They set a range within which the value of the local currency can fluctuate freely in relation to international currencies, and when it threatens to slip beyond that range, the central bank steps in. Similarly, the translator is granted a range of freedom with respect to the original text (more in some cultures than in others). If he or she exceeds that range of freedom, the work

will no longer be regarded as a translation, but as an adaptation or an aberration. Imagine, for example, a feminist translator who turned all the characters of *Moby Dick* into women, making the book an Amazon saga of revenge against the phallic whale.

We know that truly "transparent" translation is impossible; however, this does not mean that translators have absolute freedom vis-à-vis the text.¹ Translators are constrained to operate within the limits imposed by the text and the conventions of translation in their culture. This work calls for mental agility rather than free creativity.

TRANSLATION AS A PUZZLE

The actual work of translation is a bit like solving crossword puzzles. This metaphor is not meant to suggest that translation, as an intellectual task, is trivial. On the contrary, puzzles can be very challenging to the mind and spirit. Viewed one way, human work may be divided broadly into two categories: the creation of knowledge and the application of skill. In *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, there's a scene when Robert Redford is given a marksmanship test and fails because he is only capable of shooting, after drawing quickly, at a moving target. That's an example of skill, the dynamic application of knowledge, and translation is clearly a skill, one that draws on many fields of knowledge beyond mastery of the languages in question, often without prior notice.

One could not begin to be an expert in every field in which one translates unless one were phenomenally erudite or limited oneself to a very small number of fields, which is impractical from a financial standpoint. Short of acquiring full expertise, the translator can only master the relevant professional vocabulary to some degree, attempt to understand the text he is dealing with, and leave the decisions that depend upon expertise to the true experts.

A case in point is a book I translated several years ago, an aca-

demic study of Hasidic theology, a subject with which I was only vaguely familiar before accepting the job.² Fortunately, I could depend upon the author, who knows English well, to catch my errors and help me correct them, so the translation became a collaboration. She helped me understand her own arguments, which are framed in the abstract language of modern philosophy, and she corrected my rendering of extensive quotations from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century theological texts, which are couched in abstract terminology of their own, a highly idiosyncratic mixture of Hebrew and Aramaic terms inherited from Kabbalah. To compound the difficulty, these sources are written in faulty grammar because the authors were thinking in Yiddish but writing in Hebrew, which they had never studied systematically. I had to find equivalents for this many-layered text in English, a problem faced in any translation containing extensive quotations qualitatively different from the body of the work.

As hard as all this may be, it would be hubristic to compare it to the work invested by the author of this study, who devoted years to research, developed an original interpretation of the material, and presented it intelligibly. The translator's role, in this and many other cases, has many affinities with that of an editor. Editors are often puzzle solvers too, but they are not authors. Midwives may be indispensable, but they don't deserve the same credit as mothers.

Not only does the metaphor of the translator as a solver of puzzles describe the kind of mental activity going on in one's mind as one works, it also suggests a criterion for evaluating that work: it is good if the solution is correct. However, this proposed criterion demonstrates the flaw in the analogy. Whereas the solution of a puzzle is generally available and all correct solutions must be identical, there is no preexisting solution to the puzzle of translation, and two solutions could be acknowledged to be both correct and different from each other in many details.

TRANSLATION AS ADAPTATION

Another possible metaphor for the translator, which would avoid that difficulty, is that he is a musical arranger. Like someone who adapts Beethoven's *Egmont Overture* for concert band, the translator takes a piece from one medium and reproduces it in another. You might also compare translation to adapting a novel for the stage, a play for the movies, or the like.

In many ways this analogy is a useful one. The differences between two languages might well resemble those between a symphony orchestra and a concert band. The ensembles sound different, yet there's no intrinsic reason why music played by one needs to be better than music played by the other.

Nevertheless, one might legitimately ask in what way the *Egmont Overture* remains the *Egmont Overture* when a concert band plays it—just as one wonders whether Shakespeare is still Shakespeare when he's translated into Chinese. Some things move across from one language to another without a hitch, while others are simply left behind, and you have to cast about for some expressive feature of the target language that can make up for the loss—just as the band arranger has to make do without strings.

Here I would be forced to admit that the translator's activity is more creative than solving puzzles. Moreover, this analogy points to some of the differences between literary and nonliterary translation. Literary texts are often highly personal and original, and, the more a text is personal and original, the harder it is to translate. The conventions governing many kinds of nonliterary writing are fairly uniform all over the world. They are designed to be objective and impersonal. An academic article in Hebrew occupies the same, rather well-defined, stylistic niche as an academic article in any other language in which academic articles are commonly written, and the criteria of accuracy and clarity in rendering the subject matter are more important than transmitting par-

ticular features of the writer's style. But other nonliterary forms, even such ephemera as a newspaper interview using colloquial quotations to indicate the character of the interviewee, present serious problems of adaptation. Indeed, I once led an interesting discussion about some of these problems with reporters of the *Jerusalem Post*, who frequently interview people in Hebrew and quote them in English. We agreed that, although no hard and fast rules could be developed, it was helpful to articulate some of the difficulties they face.

Adaptation could be called situational translation. It is not a matter of saying, "This word or phrase in language X is equivalent to such and such a word or phrase in language Y." Rather, one says, "In this situation, whereas in language X native speakers ordinarily use such and such a word or phrase, in language Y, in an analogous situation, they ordinarily use such and such a word or phrase."

Colloquial phrases and idioms provide the clearest illustrations of this kind of situational translation. For example, in colloquial Hebrew, in situations in which an English speaker would say, "What's the matter with you?" (a strange idiom, when you think about it), one says, "Ma kara lekha?" which literally means "What happened to you?" Here's another example: French, famous for its opaque idioms, uses "Il n'y a pas de quoi," meaning literally "It doesn't have any of what there," when, in English, one would say, "Think nothing of it." (Practically, this problem is particularly acute when there is no situation in the culture of the target language readily analogous to the situation in the source language.)

One wonders whether the problem of idiom is the exception or the rule. Let us return, momentarily, to the case of the academic article. Standards of style are not uniform internationally, even in conventional forms. In some languages professors are afraid they'll sound stupid if they write short sentences. However, in English, run-on sentences are a cardinal sin, as are baroque edifices of phrases. A translator who translates into English would be

doing his client a disservice by retaining clogged syntax when simple writing is possible. Ideally, the translator should write the way his client would have written were he using the target language in the same situation. Practically, this is not possible. Moreover, the results are extremely difficult to evaluate objectively, being a matter of taste and intuition.

The human situation that produced a given academic article might be extremely complex (let's say: an overworked young academic, vying for tenure with favored rivals, trying desperately to be brilliant, while, at the same time, her marriage is breaking up because her husband resents her intellectual accomplishments). However, very little of that complexity will creep into the article, at least not overtly. By contrast, most readers (if not all critics) feel that the human situation that produced a work of literature is vital to the work, and human situations are notoriously complex. The total background of any work of literature, say a Chekhov story, is so vast that no reader or translator could completely put herself into it.

If the translator does not wonder, "How would I write this if I were Chekhov writing in early-twenty-first-century American English?" his or her effort must end in failure. Yet, if the translator is more concerned with that than with the meaning of the Russian words that Chekhov wrote, his or her work will not be translation at all. The situational approach cannot be the sole guide for the translator (unless he or she has a very special personality) because it leaves little to fall back upon besides his intuition.

TRANSLATION AS INTERPRETATION

Translators are not only puzzle solvers and adapters. They are also interpreters, and all interpretation demands a measure of intuition. One type of interpreter is the commentator or teacher, who explains a work to the less initiated. The commentator supplies information based on broader or different learning and expe-

rience than the audience's. The best commentators are also guided by intuitive insight into that elusive entity, the spirit of the text (just because it cannot be defined, we cannot deny that such a thing exists). Without an intuitive grasp, interpretation will always be obtuse and beside the point.

Obviously translation is not exactly interpretation of this kind, though it does have many elements of commentary. If there are ambiguities in a text, a translator often has to resolve them (or pass them on into the target language), and occasionally the translator must also offer information about things that would be obvious to readers of the original work (expanding a culture-bound local or topical reference, for example).

A second, more relevant type of interpreter in terms of my metaphors for translation is the oral translator, mediating, let us say, between heads of state who don't know each other's language. To be successful, the interpreter must be both self-effacing and interventive, faithful and inventive. A good interpreter does not necessarily translate word for word. He or she uses intuition to try to say what the speaker would have said if the interpreter's presence were not necessary. Good interpreters even convey the tone of voice in which the original message was spoken. They have to be physically present; they are often visible and always audible.

By contrast, translators who work in writing are physically absent (like the authors of their texts), and their voice is heard only metaphorically. But they have much in common with oral interpreters. Obviously, the more conventional the situation in which the speakers are found, the easier it is to interpret for them, because conventions can be applied to a broad range of people who conform to them. But in an unconventional situation, in which original individuals are speaking, the interpreter must be more of a virtuoso, which leads me to an expansion of the metaphor: actors and performing musicians are also interpreters, and a translation is a kind of virtual performance (as is original writing).

TRANSLATION AS PERFORMANCE

In order to interpret, one must understand, and the translator's understanding is closer to that of the performing artist than to that of the academic scholar. It is possible to translate something adequately without fully understanding it in a discursive sense and without being able to explain it. Moreover, I doubt that, in the absolute sense, anyone can ever understand a truly significant literary text well enough to translate it (just as no performance of a great piece of music can be the ultimate performance).³

Viewed this way, the differences between literary and nonliterary translation emerge in yet another guise. The metaphor of performance is applicable in an interesting way only to literary translation. Like conventional expository prose, some roles or musical scores are run-of-the-mill, presenting relatively trivial problems to the performer. Also, some nontrivial roles and scores may suit a particular performer's skills and character better than others. A fat old man with a jolly face would do better playing Falstaff than Prince Hal; a pianist with small, delicate hands probably should leave Liszt to other performers. Beyond the mere physical equipment, any interpreter must also have empathy with the material in order to perform it properly. Translators with a natural inclination for recondite and florid vocabulary with intricate, baroque sentences should not translate Hemingway. Conversely, translators who insist on limpid clarity and brevity above all should probably steer clear of Faulkner.

THE TRANSLATOR AS AN ADVOCATE OR SPOKESMAN

Like performing musicians or artists, translators are mediums for the writers they translate. Consequently, it is morally wrong to translate material with which you have no affinity. You cannot possibly do it justice.

Here too a difference between literary texts and others emerges. It is not difficult for me to identify with an academic who writes an article (perhaps because the role assumed by an academic has a relatively low quotient of personal qualities), even when I may not think terribly highly of his or her article. As I work, I might try to clear up muddy sentences and sharpen the structure of paragraphs, and I can do so because I know the conventions. Similarly, even if I disagree with a view I am translating, unless it is downright offensive, I can translate it honestly, since I respect people's right to differ with me. However, if I think that a work of literature that I am called upon to translate is simply dreadful or if I don't like the character of the implied author, I can only produce a dreadful result, just as a musician can't play a piece well if it jars with his or her own sense of what is musical.

Moreover, you might acknowledge that a given work is a good one of its kind, but you cannot open yourself up to it. If you don't like jazz, don't try to play Ellington, even though you know he is highly admired by people who do like jazz.

Ideally, I think translators should identify closely with the writers they translate, though this might be a misleading demand, for identification can also be problematic. Let us take the case of a bilingual author translating his own work, like Beckett or Nabokov. Would such an author treat his or her own text the same way as a translator who was another person? I think not. Because in this case the author is as privy to the original writer's intentions as anyone can ever be, he or she would probably assert the right to be highhanded and arbitrary, taking liberties that an ordinary translator normally would not dare to take with work written by someone else.

Is such a translation, executed by the author himself, necessarily the best translation? I can think of reasons why this might not be the case. Perhaps the writer's aesthetic judgment and mastery of the two languages are not equally reliable. Moreover, the two

languages themselves might be sufficiently dissimilar so as to make close translation problematical. Late-nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century Jewish literature knew a good number of bilingual writers who used both the Yiddish vernacular, which they spoke, and the literary Hebrew, which they studied. One of the greatest of these writers was Mendele Mokher Seforim, who translated his own books from Yiddish to Hebrew. They are considered classics in both languages, but one wonders whether a gifted translator using today's Hebrew, which has become a vernacular as it was not in Mendele's time, might actually produce a better Hebrew version than Mendele himself. Certainly it would be more readable than the original, for Hebrew has evolved rapidly in the past century.

The bilingual writer translating his own work would be more likely to produce a parallel version of that work in the second language than a strict translation—and this raises the question of whether or not such a parallel work is a true translation (or better than a translation). If it is a true translation, then all translators should aspire to produce work of that kind.

This brings us back to the problem of situational translation but confronted on a smaller scale, with relation to idioms. Perhaps a literary work is essentially a single vast idiom that needs to be interpreted situationally rather than literally.

The issue of translation, seen from this angle, leads us to a central philosophical paradox. Are we translating words or are we translating something beyond words? The author, rewriting his own work in a second language, is presumably referring to the creative matrix beyond words that underlay the original work. However, the translator's only access to that creative matrix is through the words of the original—so how dare he go beyond those words? And how dare he not go beyond them?

When we ponder the act of translation, we are led to deep and probably unanswerable questions about thinking, writing, and

the way language represents reality. Putting it diagrammatically, we may assume that there is a basic realm of experience below or beyond language. Overlying that realm of experience is the language of the original work (and, to some degree, the language itself is a component of that experience, if we remember the self-referential quality of poetic language). Now, does the translation overlie the original work, or is it an alternative stratum through which the underlying realm of experience can be glimpsed? Asked in a slightly different way, the question is: does the translation represent the reality of the text in the source language or the "reality" presumably underlying the source text?

THE TRANSLATOR AS AN HONEST BROKER

Before the translator translates, he reads. Not only are we translators among the most careful readers a work is likely to have, our reading is not private and anonymous. Our names are going to be attached to the result of our reading, and we will be criticized for it. Since that is the case, we obviously want our work to come out as well as possible. Thus translators find it difficult to resist tinkering. If we see a place where the author nodded, we want to give him a nudge. If we see a rough edge, we want to smooth it out.

Among the hoary jokes about translation is the famous (and probably apocryphal) claim that the Yiddish version of *Hamlet* was *fartaytsht un farbessert* (translated and improved). At the core of this joke lies a truth that bears expansion. Clearly it is funny to imagine the temerity of the obscure Yiddish translator improving upon the immortal Shakespeare (though every director makes cuts and changes in *Hamlet* when staging it). And generally we translators are lesser literary lights than the writers whom we translate, so respect should be our watchword.

Nevertheless, we pride ourselves on being careful, intelligent, and experienced readers, and we do occasionally see things in the

original that we would like to remove or improve upon in the translation. I doubt that there is a translator anywhere who has never emended the work being translated to some degree. Assuming that no translator would go so far as to change the plot of a novel or to add a new character (though it was once a convention of Hebrew translation to give characters Hebrew names) and that most changes would be introduced on the level of style, the problem is quantitative: at what point do small corrections accrue and become a falsification? What kind of tinkering is permissible (especially without consulting the author)? If one's literary judgment is sound, one's taste impeccable, and one's skill of the highest order, then perhaps one is doing both the author and the reader a service with these improvements. Personally, I think the translator should change as little as possible, though I know that certain very highly reputed translators have few scruples about improving the text according to their own lights as they work.

No matter what one's approach, one cannot avoid the dilemma completely, and this brings me back to the criticism leveled against me with which I began this discussion. I was accused of making a text unnecessarily obscure. Was the reviewer being unfair? Obviously it would be unconscionable for a translator to introduce obscurity in a clear text. Let us suppose, however, that the reviewer was half right, that my translation did contain obscurities, but that they existed in the original, and I decided to transfer them from Hebrew to English. Should I have done so?

There are two possibilities here: the obscurity could be intentional or unintentional. If the author is available you can ask (and I have done this), "This passage isn't clear to me. Did you want it to be hard to follow, or would you like me to clarify it in the translation?" Sometimes the answer has been yes, and sometimes it has been no. But if the author is not available and we assume that the obscurity was the result of an oversight, what should we do? Are we supposed to edit out oversights? I think so. It is the translator's

job to transmit only those qualities of the text that the author intended to give it (lively imagery, let's say, imaginative metaphors, a mixture of levels of style, varied sentence structure, and a certain tone) and that enhance the text. Yet the status of an obscurity (or another apparent flaw) in the text can itself be obscure. Writers have been known to write obscurely on purpose, and the obscurity may be part of what makes the work great.

As a critical reader, while I may be convinced that a certain obscure patch was intentionally designed to foster a literary effect, I might not like the effect. I might think the author was mistaken in using that literary technique and that it detracts from the work. Nevertheless, if it's there and it doesn't seem like an oversight, I think I must pass it on.

Not only does the translator represent the author for readers in the target language, he or she is also a representative of those readers, reading the book in its original language for them. The translator must provide readers with an honest equivalent of the experience of reading the original text, whether he or she likes and admires every feature of it or not. To do any less would be contemptuous of the readers' powers of discernment. Authors, implied and otherwise, may be devious and unreliable as part of their literary strategies, but translators, like critics, should be trustworthy and honest.

TRANSLATION AS AN ILLUSION

But how can we be, since translation is an illusion? Translating a text is something like staining tissue on a slide before you place it under the microscope. Structures stand out that would otherwise be invisible, but the stain is not part of the tissue one is examining. Or, better, think of translation as the mirror that enables a magician to deceive the audience.

When reading a translation one forgets that the translator has created an interface between realms that are not contiguous, for languages do not overlap. Each language is its own universe. It develops and functions largely without reference to other languages, despite borrowings.

Because bilingual dictionaries and glossaries are so common (and so ancient), one imagines that languages are continuous. However, a glossary is merely an aid to translation, which is the great illusion: the translator forces meaning to pass through the impenetrable barriers between languages like the magician who walks through walls.

Translation, Art or Craft?

Before backing into the profession of translation, I studied comparative literature and taught university literature courses for several years. Many of the issues that concerned me both as a student and also during my short stint as a professional academic continue to interest me as a translator, for in some respects the translator is an *applied comparatist of literature*.

Translators compare literary works to each other, they compare literary works to other types of writing, and their work touches upon the very nature of literary creation. If a good literary translation is a work of art parallel or equivalent to the original work of art, not a replica but a recreation, inspired, as it were, by the original, and if works of art are produced by artists, then the translator must be an artist.

But what kind of artist? Translators are clearly not creative artists with the same status as the authors whom they translate. Original writers set to work with only their ideas, knowledge, and skills and a box of blank stationery. Translators, by contrast, begin with someone else's finished product. They don't have to create something that never existed before, and their area of creativity is relatively restricted. In fact, if translators are too creative, people will no longer acknowledge their work as translation.

On the other hand, anyone who has practiced translation realizes very quickly that the task is not mechanical. Translation is a less than straightforward process, and it demands more than knowledge of two languages and the ability to write in one of them. It involves constant choice among alternatives few of which are self-evidently correct and all of which, in aggregate, give the translated work its character.

For example we might find that, in a given translation, every time a certain translator was faced with the choice between an idiomatic and a formal solution to a problem, he or she has consistently leaned toward the idiomatic. If such a thing as an overall index of idiomatic usage could be developed, applicable equally in both the target and the source language, we might be able to demonstrate that the translator has produced a work more idiomatic than the original and even quantify the difference.

The choice might be unconscious, a matter of the translator's personal taste, an editorial decision designed to make the translation more readable and popular, or a matter of literary insight: given the style of the original, the translator implicitly argues that one set of stylistic choices is the most appropriate. The translator's literary judgment constantly comes into play.

Translation also entails editing of a sort. Very often, as one translates, one comes upon writing that appears awkward in the original. Perhaps it is verbose, or the syntax may be tangled. Does one produce a correspondingly awkward translation, or does one

clear it up? This decision depends on whether one senses that the awkwardness is an oversight or, rather, something essential to the original writer's style and purposeful, not awkwardness at all.

Take this sentence from *Out of Africa* by Isak Dinesen: "People who have no pride are not aware of any idea of God in the making of them, and sometimes they make you doubt that there has ever been much of an idea, or else it has been lost, and who shall find it again?"⁴

If you look at it too carefully, as a translator must, you find that this sentence has skidded out of control somewhere. One's experience as a reader leads one to expect a balanced structure here: "They make you doubt X or Y," as in "I doubt that you can afford to buy this yacht or that you have the skill to sail it." Instead one finds a disjointed and incomplete structure. The phrase "or else it has been lost" should probably read: "or else *they make you think that* it has been lost." Similarly, the final rhetorical question could be fleshed out to read: "and *you wonder* who shall find it again." The syntactic confusion, created by elision, is appropriate here, demonstration of the author's point that pride is the image of God in which man has been created, and lack of pride is lack of humanity, a form of spiritual incoherence, which is mirrored in the sentence. But a translator might fall into the trap of filling in the blanks and making Dinesen's statement "clear."

Or else the problem may be a matter of dated diction. Take, for example, these two sentences from the beginning of chapter 14 of Henry James's *Portrait of a Lady*:

Isabel told her uncle that she had written to [Lord Warburton], mentioning also his intention of coming; and the old man, in consequence, left his room earlier than usual and made his appearance at the two o'clock repast. This was by no means an act of vigilance on his part, but the fruit of a benevolent belief that his being of the company might help to cover any conjoined straying away in case Isabel should give their noble visitor another hearing.⁵

How much time has passed since 1881 when this prose was first published, and what a difficulty this poses for today's translator! If one tries to use a dated style in the target language, one runs the risk of artificiality and of putting readers off. But if one writes in the modern idiom of the target language and chops James's long sentences up, one is falsifying the original. Imagine that the following rather careful paraphrase is a modern translation of that passage into another language:

Isabel told her uncle that she had written to [Lord Warburton] and that he planned to come. For that reason the old man left his room earlier than usual and came down to the two o'clock meal. His purpose was not to keep an eye on the lord and his niece. Actually, he meant to do her a favor, believing that his presence might distract the others and keep them at the table, in case Isabel wanted to leave and hold a private conversation with the noble lord to reconsider his proposal of marriage.

Were this a translation of James, I would say it was inferior to the original, yet it might be close to the only one possible, given the stylistic resources or conventions of the target language.

Not only does translation demand sensitivity to the expressive qualities of the source text, it occasionally demands originality of a sort, especially when an expression in the source language has no equivalent in the target language.

You need not look far to find recalcitrant material. Suppose, for example, you were called upon to translate the hoary joke about the ceremonial chair of an African village chief, which was stolen and hidden in the roof of a thatched hut. With poetic justice, the chair falls on the thief's head, leading to the skewed aphorism: "People in grass houses shouldn't stow thrones."

A successful Hungarian translation of this silly joke might not be a work of art, but it would certainly be a monument to human ingenuity. Hence we are speaking of the need for ingenuity rather

than creativity, which could be the difference between art and craft.

So let's call translation a craft, an activity demanding skill, knowledge, judgment, aesthetic and emotional sensitivity, and one that can be brought to a very high level—like pottery, silversmithing, or cabinetmaking. But, at least to a Western sensitivity, the level to which a desk or dresser can be brought is necessarily inferior to the level obtainable by Louise Nevelson's sculpture, let's say, though her carpentry might be found wanting in comparison to Duncan Phyfe's.

The dividing line between craft and art is not absolute. In craft, too, levels of skill and creativity come into play. The workers in a Limoges factory, turning out exquisite dinner plates decorated with a pattern created by a designer, though they may be very skillful, are less creative than a potter who chooses everything from the clay through the glaze. Craft is a component of art, and creativity is an element of craftsmanship.⁶

Perhaps the distinction between art and craft lies not in the maker's intention but in the viewer's interpretation, as we have been told repeatedly and ironically during the twentieth century. The Dadaists exhibited everyday articles like bicycle wheels or urinals and asserted that they are art if displayed as art, or that nothing is art, or that art is nothing. Similar messages are conveyed by filling a room with reproductions of the Mona Lisa or products usually displayed in supermarkets: a work of high art is no more admirable than a soup can.

Moreover, intention is a very thorny issue. Often we can do no more than infer the intentions of the people who made objects in the past, such as the builders of Stonehenge, and the relevance of intentions to the evaluation of results is never clear. Returning to the topic of translation, must we take them at their word if translator A insists that his or her work must be judged as an independent work of art, whereas translator C modestly demurs, claiming

to be merely a craftsman? Suppose readers find that C's translations are inspired, whereas A produces drab hackwork?

Further, the distinction between craft and art is culture-bound. I have heard from experts in classical Chinese and Japanese painting that in their tradition an artist was not expected to innovate and produce new and original works, as in the West. Rather, the painter was supposed to imitate and produce new versions of classical works. So, in responding to that tradition, how can a Western eye distinguish between artists and craftspeople?

Presumably some cultures don't make the distinction between art and craft because they don't invest artists with the powers with which Western culture invests them, and artists don't view themselves as uniquely creative individuals—geniuses. In such cultures, we would rate artists and craftspeople on a single scale, on the basis of their skill. Hence, in such a culture, a translator who showed mastery of his or her language and sensitivity to its nuances could conceivably be rated higher than a writer less skilled in the language, but original.

Even in our culture, where the original artist is king and the copier is a thief of intellectual property, it may well happen that a translator could be regarded as a greater artist than a novelist or poet because of what is being translated. Someone who produces a sensitive English version of Dante, for example, and no original poetry of his or her own, could well be acknowledged as a greater poet than someone whose poems are "original." Similarly, a successful translator of Flaubert or Thomas Mann would almost certainly be recognized as more of an artist, even more of a creative artist, than writers who mass-produce soap operas and situation comedies. So, while admitting that the artistic potential of original creative writing outstrips that of translation, we have been forced to acknowledge that some translators may be more of an artist than some original writers.

This is a situation often found in comparing members of two

groups. For example, adult human males are, on the average, taller and heavier than adult human females, but some human females are taller and heavier than some human males. Or: Jewish people generally are better at Talmud study than non-Jews. However, some non-Jewish scholars have acquired a background in Talmud and are undeniably better at Talmud study than many Jews who have no background in it at all.

Put in a different way, perhaps we have a continuum or even several overlapping continuums. At one end is work that no one would claim to be art, while at the other end is work that everyone would acknowledge as art. Someone translating an instruction manual from English to Turkish could claim to be no more than a craftsman, whereas the same translator, rendering T. S. Eliot's poetry into Turkish, would not be considered arrogant if he or she claimed to be an artist. On the other hand, the translator of the instruction manual might add witty and creative illustrations of his or her own, whereas the translator of the poetry might merely produce a clumsy interlinear trot as a study aid.

In the final analysis, no unequivocal answer may be found to the question of whether a translator is an artist or a craftsman because the distinction between art and craft is fuzzy. Although mastery of a craft is clearly an element of artistic achievement, a talented artist could conceivably be a poor craftsman, and a consummate craftsman could have little artistic talent, poor aesthetic taste, and other artistic limitations.

Rather than trying to solve the recalcitrant puzzle of art versus craft, perhaps it would be more useful to view the translator as an interpretative rather than a creative artist: a performer or conductor rather than a composer; an actor or director rather than a playwright.

Skill is obviously a major issue when we evaluate the performances of interpretative artists, just as skill is a major criterion for judging a translation. Moreover, the creative latitude of the per-

forming artist, even that of the conductor of a symphony or the director of a play, is similar to that of the translator.

Our evaluation of the artistry of an interpretative artist depends heavily on what is being interpreted, just like our evaluation of the artistry of a translator. To play the Brahms Violin Concerto in D Major well, a violinist must be a splendid artist, whereas a musician playing in the violin section of even a fine symphony orchestra must be more of a craftsman—which is not to imply that the orchestral violinist would be incapable of performing the concerto or that the soloist might not play in a violin section from time to time. No one can possibly be an artist all the time, not even an interpretative artist.

One artistic element of interpretative artistry that could be useful in thinking about translation is virtuosity. Sometimes the brilliance of a performance, the sheer skill exhibited, can be so impressive that one doesn't care whether the piece being played is worthy of such skill. Take Vladimir Horowitz's performance of his arrangement of "The Stars and Stripes Forever."

Of course original writers also display virtuosity, sometimes at the expense of other literary virtues, and in any event I am not satisfied with thinking of translators as interpretative artists, essentially performers, since there are several important differences between what translators do and what performers do. The performer does not transfer a work from one medium to another, but the performer does appear in person either before a live audience or in a recording or film. The performance takes place in real time. As a translator, one transfers a work written in a foreign language, in different historical circumstances, by someone else, into a work written by oneself in one's own language (or one that one knows well) and one's own historical circumstances. But, unlike performers, translators are invisible, and their work can be spread out over time and constantly revised before being presented, like that of the creative artist. Perhaps it would be better to think of the trans-

lator as doing work similar to the musical arranger, producing a two-piano version of an opera or scoring a symphony for concert band.

Like the translator, while working with a great piece of music a musical arranger must be more of an artist than while working with pedestrian material. And, like the translator, the musical arranger might conceivably surpass the original composer. But, by and large, both the translator and the arranger are subordinate to the original work.

In conclusion, having been trained in comparative literature, it was natural for me to compare translation to other creative aesthetic and interpretive activities. In the end I have found that these comparisons are useful in a rather negative sense. They lead directly into a thicket of confused terminology. For the question of what kind of an artist the translator might be cannot be answered without defining "art," "craft," "creativity," "originality," "performance," "interpretation," "virtuosity," and many other slippery terms. Moreover, even if all of those terms were defined satisfactorily, the question whether translation is art can still be answered only contingently: under certain conditions. Although this lesson is equivocal, I would maintain that it is quite valuable.

A shorter and slightly different version of this chapter, with the same title, was published in *In Other Words, Journal of the Translators Association*, no. 5 (1995): 17-21.

Honesty in Translation

Strangely, for a person who makes his living from manipulating words, I often think they don't mean anything, particularly when they are straining to mean the most. Take, for example, the following sentences from an autobiographical account of exposure to Sufi wisdom: "What is important for you to know is that we will meet in the knowledge of Unity. So whatever the Second Coming means, and however it happens, it can only come about through the inner, hidden knowledge that underlies all the great religions and which unites us all."⁷

Meeting "in the knowledge of Unity" is different from meeting under the clock at the Biltmore. If anyone claims to live "in the knowledge of Unity," what can you do to refute or corroborate that claim? And if the "knowledge that underlies all the great re-