

What Is Translation?

Translation interview, May, 2013 issue of the fine *Buried Letter* (www.buriedletter.com) from Buried Letter Press. Used with permission.

BLP: How would you define translation?

EZ: I think of translation as moving. It's both moving yourself between two places, and moving a thing, a thing you want to share. I'm being etymological, I think, when I say it's *carrying* something from one place (or one user, one consumer) to another. Think of bringing a new wine, elderberry wine, to a culture that has only known grape wine. There's the form—the making of the wine—and there's the content, which is everything you get out of drinking wine. And, as to both form and content, there are cultural components that are similar (between the two wine-drinking communities) and cultural things that are different, too. And if you think how people, in New England at least, used to make and drink elderberry wine more than they do now, you're not just carrying the wine from one culture to another, but also from one era to another. New enjoyments result, and new insights—in fact a whole adventure of novelty is part of what translation brings. An aesthetic of novelty.

BLP: Would you say that translation is an art form?

EZ: To me translation is an art form, although we can get a little hung up on ideas about form. Keep in mind that the original work of art is itself a translation, possibly from one form to another. From something visual to words, from something auditory (non-verbal) to words, from some impulse of the original artist to a final form. Is it a syllogism to say art is a translation, therefore all translation is art? I don't know. Certainly, literary translation's main job is to work between two (written) art forms, deriving from two languages (and two cultures, since culture creates the forms of language). (I mean, for the non-Whorfians and non-Chomskyans among us.) But it might be helpful to step away from the exactions of form for a minute.

Translation is an art because it does what art does: it mediates, and it mediates the same things in the same ways. It's easy to picture the tight-rope you are on as a translator, the balance you have to have, all the things you have to consider—but all art has these, or most of these, challenges. Any artist mediates between her sense of something and her audience's sense of it, or between the conventional sense and the revelatory sense, or between the mundane sunset and the rare extraordinary sunset, the real and the ideal, the divine and the secular. I am defining translation in this interview, but it's like defining art: the whole history of the latter definition has been the redefining of types of mediation.

The translator is the most intense mediator of all. And let's stick to literature for a moment. The translator starts with art and then has to mediate further in all art's nuts and bolts—between the source language and the target language. Bit of jargon there.

Now think of the elements that are mediated—tuned, adjusted—when you write a poem. The translator sets out to sense and to shape everything the original poet was mediating (to the extent that he or she grasps what the poet was trying to do) while at the same time toggling back and forth between the two languages. This takes some of the central processes of art and raises them to a very high intensity.

BLP: Is language the main focus of the translator? What is translated beside language?

EZ: The field of language, and the operations of literary translation, are so complex and all-absorbing that, for me, they are the main focus, they are the ball game. But it's really healthy and energizing to think about translation in other domains. Ekphrastic poetry, for one. If you describe a painting in words—or describe music—you are translating, especially if you do it evocatively and not analytically. And—as to your last question—yes, this is art, just as the original painting was art. I just put out a book of my own poetry, ekphrastic, and occasionally a reader says “I wish the paintings were in the book too.” “But they *are*, Madam, they *are*.” Sheesh. They're present, just translated.

Let's think even bigger. I believe we all translate the world—its forms, movements, events—every day, into our construct of our position in the world. Another example. I think the people who love you translate you into something a bit different from what you are (something better, in my case)—or is it mistranslate? Who can say?... but it's an ongoing translation.

To really expand this, we can enlarge the notion of syntax. I have this notion that the way you walk down a street, you the individual, past people and objects, is a syntax. It's a structured, rhythmic flow of suggestions and significations. Now transport that movement, your way of walking down a street, to India or Switzerland. The stuff of this new street is translated, as you move, into your syntax. At the same time, the patterns and internal awarenesses that make up your syntax (your walking-down-a-street syntax) are translated—by the stuff of this new street—into a new kind of awareness.

So, many things are translated. It might help to be Platonic about these possibilities. Maybe in the way that Mallarmé said philosophy was “included” and “latent” in his poetry! Or at least to be aware that forms (what our senses perceive) and their renderings in art (music, dance, painting, writing, any art) are never the turbulent soul of things. We have to be alert to what Wallace Stevens called the shift (and it's a translation) from *substance* to *subtlety*.

BLP: What is the “goal” or “intention” of translation? What does a translator/artist hope to accomplish?

EZ: In a pleasure-seeking way, non-utilitarian way (though it leads to a good translation), you hope to get closer to the original text. Some of this is a bit technical, or theoretical, so I don't know how much you want to focus on that. But one thing that happens is that you get *inside* the text in a special way. In an ideal sense, it is what any reader wants (when it's material the reader loves, or that is very valuable to him or her in some way), and I would think it's what the original writer would want and expect. If the writer is an artist. Keep in mind what several people have said: The best reader a text will ever have is its translator.

Of course, you hope to accomplish a social goal, allowing more people to enjoy a text that was previously closed to them. I don't know if that's something to develop here. But back to my selfish goals, my pleasure goals, I actually hope to accomplish a new text that's as rich and effective as the original. Or more so. There are examples of translations thought to be better than the originals. And Borges said "The original is unfaithful to the translation." That gives you an idea of how he thought of translation as art, what he thought the translator/artist can accomplish.

BLP: Can you comment on the process of translation? What is revelatory about the process of translation for the translator, the reader?

EZ: This actually gives us a chance to talk about the stranger and deeper aspects of translation. Though maybe what you want is the procedure, or my process; I don't think that's as interesting, and, in any case, translators vary so widely in how they go about it. A very big deal translator, Gregory Rabassa, doesn't even read the novel he is about to translate, that is, read it first—he just starts right in. That's an example.

What I think is very interesting is what happens to us *in* the process, what happens to language, what happens to the original text. And, to answer your last question more philosophically, this is one of my goals—to get to a new place with language. It's really to get a new sense of the original text, while getting somehow outside of both the source (original) language and the target language. I've said before that you get *inside*, but that's to mess with its nuts and bolts (this applies to the text, to the source language and to the target language). But in the end you dissolve, in a way, both languages and operate in a zone that is curiously outside of both. I'll explain what I mean.

It's helpful to think (I do hope you agree!) how any work of art is inexact in many ways. It doesn't exactly convey what the artist thinks it does. Or it doesn't affect everyone in exactly the same way. Or it isn't exactly, in the end, the product that the artist started to construct. And this is aside from—though, really, it compounds!—the notion that a finished artistic product is "dead" in some way, no longer viable the way it was before the last touch was applied. Though the translator will also be "finished" at some point, and the translation may be "dead" in this same way, he or she has at least shaken the original work alive again, rearranged its parts, gotten in amongst it at the stage where it was most viable. The translator has prolonged that stage.

So, now, let's think about how language never really says exactly what we mean. We have to think widely here, think Wittgenstein. His questioning of how words mean anything at all—what it is to “mean” something. We can think of how words die and become inadequate, too—think of the ready-mades that people like Ionesco and Robbe-Grillet make fun of, or the buzzing little routines and “tropisms” (for Nathalie Sarraute) that our minds are full of. Or, to make words seem more alive, but in a perverse way, think of Wittgenstein's “There is no such thing as the literal meaning.” The fun part, for me, is waking up all kinds of extended meanings. It's even fun to bust Robbe-Grillet, who detested metaphor, and discover that, when he's trying to be his most exacting, he says—I'm sure without meaning to—that a wave “unfurls.”

Picture, for a second, the little fuzz-balls of “meaning” swirling around words, then the larger fuzz-ball surrounding a text. Then, as translator, you bring the set of fuzz-balls from another language over next to this first group.

This is, roughly, what I meant by “outside of language.” You are operating in, enjoying, the fuzzy space which is outside the settled, defined, frozen confines of an established text and its generally accepted “meaning.” In a sense—in the Walter Benjamin sense, famously—you are operating in the space where language is most alive. Ideally, it is the space where the original artist was moving, before settling on certain forms. I've probably said too much about this already, and it takes some reflection to get used to, perhaps. But it lets us move on to another set of terms that I find very helpful.

We commonly think of translation as binary, with one text opposed to the separate text that results from translation. But, as we've just said, it's more interesting to think of translation as existing in a third space between these two. (Certainly, the work of translation takes place here, before the second text is finally achieved.) Several people have described a “third space,” some calling it a “ghost space,” or a sort of penumbra between the two texts. I like William Frawley's term “third code,” because I find his explanation a bit more concrete than some people's. He sees the first code as the settled language of the source (original) text. The second code is somewhat like (not exactly) the literal translation, or the most obvious translation of that, into the second language. It is sort of like an operation where the rules of language are in charge, more than the volition and good instincts of the translator. Think of it as the code of that second (target) language, its tendencies, tropes, its dead spots (hackneyed phrases), awkwardnesses, peculiar bits of syntax, strengths and weaknesses of vocabulary. The translator's job is to resist that code. This is part of the mediating that a translator does—mediating between the first and second codes. This effort is an attempt to evoke a third code, and to achieve a translation, a final product, as much as possible in that third code—in a language that seems as alive, recalcitrant, almost alien as the language the original artist was playing with while conceiving the original text.

So, you asked what is revelatory. I hope, for people who have not thought much about translation, that this whole conversation is revelatory! I hope words are revelatory when one reads fine translation journals like *Asymptote*, *Circumference* or *Ezra*. In the end, for me, the

successful translation is revelatory in the way that the beautiful original piece is (and perhaps you can see how it won't work unless you have the kind of mediating discipline we've just been describing): you have these moments where you're just astonished, where you say "I've never seen that," or "I didn't know language could do that."

BLP: Many think of translation in the conventional sense of translating works of literary or informative value. Is translation only an academic, economic or political practice, or does it have a social function, possibly as a practice? Is translation socially relevant?

EZ: Let's look at your phrase "as a practice," in social contexts. I mean, in many parts of the world, that question would not even be part of the interview, because translation is so much a social practice, so much a part of every day's rich social activity. Many Europeans view it this way, and it gets very interesting in the African context, too. We should look at that in a second.

When you say "only academic," let's graft that onto what I've said earlier, about literary translation, which will leave just your "political" and "economical" worlds to consider. In a place like Africa "the language question" is tense, and largely political. Putting aside what's called identity politics, language still enters into real, hard, old fashioned politics. In Algeria, for example, the new ruling class is causing a huge exodus of intellectuals and writers, largely over language. In the worst days of the Islamization and Arabization movement, in the '90s, many who spoke French felt alienated and disenfranchised. It's not just that there was a class of educated people for whom French was one linguistic tool. These were writers who did their literary thinking, not just their writing, in French. They didn't want to be forcibly translated, one way or another, into Arabic. They didn't like the ruling class, and, on top of all that, Arabic was not some kind of natural solution for them. Many of them were not Arabs, but Berbers. This controversy, with minor variations, is happening all over North Africa. It complicates the purely anti-colonial or post-colonial cast (more typical) of "the language question" in sub-Saharan Africa. In the latter context, to turn to economics, Gayatri Spivak and Wangui wa Goro and others have started talking about issues of power and economics in translation. That is, the imbalance of power that can exist between the translated and the translator. It is interesting to work this into your thinking: not just the economics of what you choose to translate, how you publish or market it afterwards, but also an imbalance of economic situation as a backdrop, a subtle coloring, word by word, of your translating practice.

So, to wrap up the socially relevant perspective, it's clear that, if this were your field of interest—and it will be a growing field—you could go on forever about issues related to what we've just covered. In terms of aid agencies, political economics, education issues and so on—all on top of the well tramped field of language as a part of trans-cultured identity and identity politics. But there is a tremendously important final point to make about all this. The economics and politics *are* the social practice. In most parts of the world they are completely woven into the social practice of translation. So, instead of the practice merely having a social relevance, we have to see it as everywhere, and as a saving presence. Translation as an activism.

