The Art of Translation

Unlike the linguistics-oriented theories of translation aiming at the science of translating (Nida; Catford; Nida and Tabar; Peter Newmark), almost all literary theories of translation are basically agreed on the artistic nature of translating. Not surprisingly, 'The Art of Translation' is the title both of Thomas Savory's book (1937) as well as of Horst Frenz's article (1961: 72 -95. The fact that some have used the term 'craft of translation' (W. Arrowsmith and H. Shuttuck) is perhaps more to highlight the aspect of skill involved in translating rather than to suggest that translation is a completely mechanical exercise or less of an art. Horst Frenz discusses at some length what type of art translation is and why he calls translation art:

> However, it should be pointed out that translating is neither a **creative art** nor an **imitative art**, but stands somewhere between the two. It is not creative because it does not follow the **inspirations of the translator**, but rather undertakes to create in **the manner of another** that which is already created. But neither is it an imitative art, for it must not only convey the idea of the work translated, but must also **transform it**. The translator must be creative, a "maker"; at the same time, he must submit to the reality of the writer whom he is translating. Thus translating is a **matter of continuous subconscious association with the original, a matter of meditation.** Two spheres of languages move closer together through the medium of the translator to fuse at the moment of the contact into a new form, a new Gestalt. Here we recognize signs of an artistic process. The fact that the perfect fusion is not always reached should not prevent us from calling translating an art. After all in the other arts, there are amateurs, craftsmen, and masters, too. (Horst Frenz 64)

This problem of creative versus imitative art in literary translation has been likened by André Lefevere to the art of painting as against the craft of photography. He states that a literary translation has to be more creative than imitative (Lefevere 14). Thus, there is a perceptible unanimity of viewpoints on considering literary translation an art but not on what type of art it is.

Throughout the centuries grave doubts have been raised over the feasibility of translations of literary works. Again and again, it has been maintained that it is not possible for anyone to combine in another language the thoughts, emotions, style, and the form of an epic, a lyric poem, a poetic drama, or even a prose novel. Yet the fact remains that the art of translation has been practiced everywhere in the world. Through this art, many of the literary achievements of one country have found a hearing and even become "naturalized" in other countries. Their people have been able to share the experiences and emotions expressed in foreign works, and men of letters have been stimulated and even profoundly influenced by them.

Most readers must depend upon the translator if they are to know and appreciate the literature of the world. His role is more important than is often realized. One of the most striking illustrations is probably the case of the German Shakespeare translation commonly referred to as the

Schlegel-Tieck translation. Between 1797 and 1810 August Wilhelm Schlegel published seventeen of Shakespeare's plays, and the remaining ones were translated by Count von Baudissin and Dorothea Tieck under the supervision and cooperation of her father, Ludwig Tieck. The principle on which these translations were based was faithfulness. Schlegel, realizing the importance of Shakespeare's fondness for mixing poetic and prose elements, preserved Shakespeare's verse forms; he differentiated between rhetorical and conversational prose and attempted in many other ways to reproduce the original.

The Schlegel-Tieck version transformed Shakespeare into a German classic poet who was read, played, and quoted as widely as the German masters themselves. In his lecture on *"Shakespeare and Germany,"* 1 Alois Brandl cited as one of the qualities of this version that "the obsolete words and the quaint meanings of words which often puzzle his English readers, and sometimes even demand comment, are replaced by current phrases." "In our classical translation by Schlegel-Tieck," Brandl continues, "the meaning is put forth so clearly that, when I had to reprint it in a popular edition, there was sometimes not even one passage to be explained in a whole play -- so perfectly had the Tudor words been recast in lucid and up-to-date German." Thus, a German reader and spectator might come closer to an understanding of Shakespeare than "a Londoner, who has no other choice than to take him in the original." Schlegel's poetic gift produced a work of art that, while it was faithful to the original, could stand on its own as an original work. He was an "Umdichter," a poet able to use his imaginative powers freely and at the same time willing to accept the Englishman as his master.

Today the name of the American poet Bayard Taylor is known more for his translation of Goethe *Faust* than for his own writings. A true disciple of the German poet he undertook the tremendous task of rendering both parts of *Faust* into English and was the first American to try his hand at translating the second part. In order to do justice to the original, he delved into the mysteries of early Greek mythology, studied certain geological theories, and extended his research to editions and critical works throughout the world. Understanding clearly the relationships between the two parts of Faust he delighted in the second part because of "its wealth of illustration, and the almost inexhaustible variety and beauty of its rhythmical forms." Taylor, like Schlegel before him, believed in utter fidelity to the sense of the original work of art, in reproducing the verse forms and even, as far as possible, the rhythm and rhyme. A poet in his own right, he was willing to subordinate his poetic powers to the work of his master and thus created a standard work that has lasted far beyond his own time. His Faust translation was not only recognized as a significant literary production at the time of its publication but also became the model for many later versions.

Just as Schlegel's Shakespeare translations contain for some modern Germans too much of the Romantic, Taylor *Faust* has been found by modern Americans to be too Victorian in the use of

idiom and rhetoric. However, both men have done invaluable service in presenting a great foreign literary figure to their countrymen. Their translations are still alive today, even if, particularly in Taylor's case, only as an inspiration to new attempts at translation in the light of recent scholarship and new insights.

In England, too, several translations have found a permanent place and exerted their influence throughout the ages. Besides the Authorized Version of the Bible might be mentioned Chapman *Homeric* poems, Pope *Iliad*, Dryden's *Vergil*, and in the nineteenth century Edward FitzGerald's *Rubaiyyat.* The last work is particularly interesting, for in this case an obscure Persian poet was brought to the attention of the English-speaking world. FitzGerald's important place in the development of English literature has been secured not through any of his original works but through this translation, which, in the opinion of one authority, is "probably quoted more frequently than any other work in English literature."

Charles Eliot Norton, the editor of the North American Review, first recognized the quality of FitzGerald's work -- without actually knowing the identity of the translator. He spoke of the "poetic transfusion of a poetic spirit from one language to another, and the re-presentation of the ideas and images of the original in a form not altogether diverse from their own, but perfectly adapted to the new conditions of time, place, custom, and habit of mind in which they reappear." He called the Rubaiyyat "the work of a poet inspired by the work of a poet; not a copy, but a reproduction, not a translation, but the redelivery of a poetic inspiration," and concluded that "there is probably nothing in the mass of English translations or reproductions of the poetry of the East to be compared with this little volume in point of value as English poetry."

FitzGerald concerned himself little with theological or philosophical problems but found in the epigrammatic stanzas of the Persian poet some answers to his own feelings of doubt, to his questions concerning life after death, and to the complexities of modern life. The consensus of recent scholarly opinion is that most of FitzGerald's quatrains were either "faithful . . . paraphrases" or "composite" stanzas "traceable to more than one quatrain" and that the English poet after the first two editions eliminated most of those quatrains for which there had been no particular ones in the original. He selected from Omar, regrouped the quatrains, and thus gave a certain form to the whole. Even if he created a somewhat different mood, as some critics maintain, there is no justification for going so far as to conclude that the Rubaiyyat is no more than "an English poem with Persian allusions." Whatever changes FitzGerald made in transferring the Rubaiyyat from Persia to England and whatever method of translating he used to convey the ideas and the emotions of the Oriental poet the fact remains that he succeeded in making this work known not only in England but also in the whole Western world.

These three examples cited at random reveal some interesting similarities. In each case, a poet attempted to translate another poet's work and made a great success of it. All three- Schlegel, Taylor, and FitzGerald -- became well-known figures in world literature largely because of their work as translators. All three did a great deal of preliminary or supplementary labor in connection with the work they were translating. While the first two transplanted two giants of literature, FitzGerald brought a little-known writer of the East to the attention of his countrymen and proved how effectively the translator can open new lanes in the literary world traffic. Furthermore, these illustrations are by no means exceptional. Translation has flourished during many of the great epochs of literature, and there seems to be general agreement that the Elizabethan age, for instance, "was also the first great age of translation in England."

To be sure, some countries have depended on translation more than others. It is perhaps true that "German is a language into which others . . . can be more faithfully and successfully translated than into any other"; and that "l'Allemagne est le plus grand pays traducteur du monde." The twentieth century is far from reversing the trend. "*Le xxe siècle, l'âge de la traduction par excellence*," a French authority maintains. Even in France, so long notoriously self-sufficient in literary matters, translation now exceeds ten percent of the total printed production. It is hardly an exaggeration to assert that the "monde moderne apparaît comme une immense machine â traduire." The task of the translator is increasing in importance and he is contributing in a large measure to a one-world concept.

One must also admit that the translator may do a great deal of harm in several ways. First, he may translate the wrong works, which is unknowingly or intentionally ignoring certain literary achievements which are worthy of becoming better known. Here fads and fashions play a role, too, and a translator may submit to them in selecting his subjects. It has been claimed again and again that great literary works have a way of attracting attention abroad, but it is very doubtful that this optimistic point of view can be applied to literatures in less well-known languages or in culturally and politically less important areas. Also, ideological curtains of all kinds, political and economic barriers, and racial prejudices are formidable enough to interfere with the task of the translator which should be, above all, to acquaint his own country with the best literature that has been produced in foreign languages.

Then, there is the harm that can be done by a translator who distorts a literary work and thus becomes responsible for presenting an idea or a point of view or a mood that was actually not expressed by the foreign writer. Rabelais, for instance, has become known in the English-speaking world as "a bibulous, gormandizing 'philosopher' shaking his sides in laughter at the follies of humankind and the essential vanity of life" as the result of Sir Thomas Urquhart's translation. By injecting an "amiable scepticism," by implying erotic undertones where there were none in the

original, Urquhart created, according to Samuel Putnam, "a false or grossly distorted conception of Rabelais." Urquhart's difficult seventeenth-century style helped to obscure the real Rabelais whose works, after all, were best sellers enjoyed "alike by the learned and the unlearned of his time," whose sentence structure is "prevailingly short, simple, and direct." It was the style of the English translator that prevented many from reading Rabelais and encouraged a "cult on the part of a select few." An aura was created, which the original never had.

While in the case just mentioned it cannot be said that the translator intentionally distorted the original, there are other instances in which the translator is fully aware of what he is doing. When the German version of the American war play, *What Price Glory?* (German title: Rivalen), by Maxwell Anderson and Laurence Stallings was presented in Berlin in 1929, it did not, as most critics seemed to think, preserve the American point of view. Instead, it had become a play that used the Americans' plot as a vehicle for Carl Zuckmayer's own feelings against militarism, to express his ideas of the "Etappe," to give his conception of the experiences in the front lines and to portray French and Jewish characters according to his own whims. Zuckmayer did the two playwrights a disservice by introducing his own ideas into the American war play. Interestingly enough, it never had the success that the British war play, *Journey's End*, experienced in Germany at about the same time; that play had been translated very faithfully. One may venture the conjecture that the German audiences found nothing in the American play they could not find in their own war plays.

In the past, it has often been common practice for translators to delete from or add to a work indiscriminately, in line with their own religious bias or because they were shocked and embarrassed by statements that struck them as immoral or obscene. Peter Motteux, who continued the Rabelais translation begun by Sir Thomas Urquhart, was a "rabid Protestant" and showed his religious bias when he simply deleted a significant passage that shows the Calvinists in an unfavorable light. In Edith Wharton's translation of Sudermann's play, Es lebe das Leben, a nobleman's line, "Wenn ich mit einer gesunden Kuhmagd Kinder zeugen dürfte," becomes "If only I could marry a healthy dairymaid." The suggestion of marriage to a dairy-maid is made, I assume, out of moral consideration; it hardly conveys the caste concept of the nobility expressed in the original statement.

Likewise, plain mistranslations made either out of ignorance of the foreign language or out of carelessness cannot be condoned. In his version of *What Price Glory*?, Zuckmayer obviously shows ignorance of an American colloquialism when he renders the sentence, "parks his dogs in Flagg's bed" literally as "lässt seine Hunde in Flaggs Bett liegen" instead of realizing that "dogs" is slang for "feet." In this case, the result is amusing, but at times a mistranslation can have rather serious consequences. Instead of being a means of bringing two nations together, a wrong

translation may have the opposite effect and may tear them apart. Aesthetically, wrong as well as bad translations harm the original author and his and his country's reputation. As Gilbert Highet put it, "A badly written book is only a blunder. A bad translation of a good book is a crime."

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