Cluster, leaps, agenda.

Von *Tomás Cohen*

1. Cluster of translation & love. News from Westopia

I come fresh with the experience of having co-curated a festival about translation, multilingual literature and their related culture policies in Burg Hülshoff, Center for Literature. At that festival, called “Westopia”, our Foundintranslation Autor:innenkollektiv put forward questions crucial for us as foreign writers in Germany who crave recognition by the Literaturbetrieb but are not attracted by its stagnant facade - exemplified by many Literaturhäuser. How can a literature that is mehrsprachig and irreducible to nation alone create our future? Can translation as a language of kinship provide a model of solidarity between cultures? We tried to answer these questions from our grassroots level, searching in our frustrations and losses: in translation. The opening keynote lecture of that festival was given by the Chilean philosopher and translator Andres Claro. Here is a quote from it:

> “…one could say that the ultimate law of translation as a language of kinship would debar any subjectivity from a claim to simple self-constitution and self-identification. The ultimate law of translation –the irreducibility of the interbreeding principle– would also work against the idea of the nation and all it entails –homeland, citizenship, sovereignty, country– as a homogeneous identity that could be possessed and delimited within rigid borders. As an operation that belongs to no tongue, as a language performance that moves among them without fixed citizenship, the language of kinship makes us see that any nation, like any tongue, needs to be understood as an active interbreeding without a single origin or identity.”

I start with this news from Westopia since I am confident that the ethos of that September festival connects with the issues that convoke us now in early November. One of the key questions with which Aurélie Maurin kindly invited me to participate was the following (paraphrased a bit harsher): *have the recent controversies imposed on translation by identity politics made you afraid of translating?* I’m no professionally published translator but, still, I would answer that what has happened is actually the opposite: I have felt encouraged to engage in ever more radical approaches to translation. I have reacted by contrast.

Beyond the ridiculous claims that a translator must have a similar background or be of a similar ethnicity to the author she is translating, there is that deeper-ingrained myth of the translator’s absolute mastery over what she translates. Has the literary translator understood completely the source text she will translate from? Not necessarily. The translator of poetry should be first and foremost fluent in poetry, more than in the source language. I would even posit the question of whether the full understanding of a deep literary text is even possible. The translator has fallen in love with a text. When we fall in love, is it because we fully understand the beloved object? Really? Or is it more because something that we cannot domesticate through understanding keeps us going? Having glimpsed a source that can deepen her senses

towards an offering, the translator will switch her perspective, widening her world, hoping that that opening can change the perspective of whoever reads her translation. (Under this light, the proposed Begriff of “sensitivity translating” sounds to me somewhat like a pleonasm, since translating is per se becoming sensitive and making sensitive.) Through the experience of translating, the translator will stretch her micro- to a macrocosmos— she will not only research and learn more about the author and the socio-historical background from which the source text sprung; she will also explore and learn and unlearn what is supposedly natural to her: her mother tongue.

“Was es heißt, einer Sprache anzugehören. Was Muttersprache heißt, in einem anderen Land, wenn die eigene Mutter einer anderen Sprache angehört.”, wrote Nefeli Kavouras, born in Bavaria to Greek parents, a colleague of mine and co-curator of Westopia. In that same festival, the philosopher Andrés Claro asked:

> “is not this interbreeding at work in all languages and literatures, operative beneath the pretended homogeneity of any subject and culture, owing to an earlier and irreducible presence of the foreign that calls into question identity as homogeneity of the native? This, it seems to me, is where a patient approach to literary translation would concentrate its energies: on this utopian language of kinship as a new model of kinship as such, as a recognition that all identity is constituted, and always has been, by an irreducible otherness; that all possession and kinship arise midway through a movement of wandering and exile.”

“Lo mejor es cuando traducís poemas que te entusiasman, que te hacen sentir como si estuvieras enamorada”, said Monika Rinck in an interview published in Argentinian Spanish, Sí… doesn’t translation ideally entail the closest reading? So that the inner commotion, the convinced doubt felt at the source can be rebuilt as destination with radically different materials. This way, instead of recalling separation, mediation becomes lively, liveable— that’s why reading a bilingual edition invites an art of wholesome suspicion. Somewhere in his Cahiers, Paul Valéry reflects that when we fall in love, we fall for what we can’t understand but can endlessly try to grasp without ever losing the mystery of it in the beloved. And that through projection onto that unattainable, love becomes an act of creation. The untranslatable in the beloved source being what sustains the translating.

The fact that to transfer the meaning of a word has always proven problematic endlessly is what qualifies it as an untranslatable. That is, not a word that “cannot” be translated, but one that has been translated over and over in a branching array of meanings without having ever surpassed the frustration of having to choose only one of its possibilities in utero, out of the all-potentiality of the Muttersprache— a painful process naturally encountered in the labour of any translator: namely, disambiguation.

Allow me to add yet another note to this translation & love cluster, since I feel that the etymology of the word “desire” might relate. The Dictionary of Untranslatables (edited by Barbara Cassin and Emily Apter et al.) informs us that “desire” comes from the latin *desiderare*, composed of the privative *de-* and *sidus, sideris* (star). Literally, “to stop seeing the star”, “to condemn the absence of”, “to miss”, while *considerare* means “to see the star”, “to examine with care or respect”. We examine with care and respect the source text we have fallen in love with. And when translating we must accept that we will stop seeing the star that made us want to translate. We might

replace it with another kind of celestial shining: instead of guiding star, a planet— maybe habitable.

2. Leaps. A handful of opacity over the transparent bridge

Towards the end of the Steven Spielberg movie Indiana Jones and The Last Crusade there is a scene with some metaphorical potential which I want to recall. Indiana Jones has traversed two out of three "tests for the faithful" that separate intruders from a chamber where the Holy Grail is supposed to lie. The protagonist reaches a seemingly unsurpassable cliff. Annotations in his father's notebook refer to this third test as "the leap of faith": the searcher for the relic of holy origin must step confidently into the void, exercising true belief. Rushed by the knowledge that his own source / father is about to dry up / die and that only the healing power of the Grail can save it / him, Indiana Jones daringly takes the leap with a step that "hits" the air, resounding solid. Having realised that there was actually a bridge between the two cliff walls (made seemingly invisible or transparent through an elaborate *trompe-l'œil* that imitated stone) he keeps walking forwards and crosses it. A slight change of perspective of the camera (looking at the revealed bridge not straightforwardly anymore, but from an oblique angle) makes us realise Indiana Jones' realisation: the bridge is now manifest, separate from the opposite cliff wall, and we know that some art (the *trompe-l'œil*) was at the heart of this test. For others to see what he has seen, for the followers of his footsteps, he throws a handful of sand over the transparent bridge, making it opaque.

Leaping from popcorn film to a legend of modern painting, here is something that Paul Cézanne wrote in a letter to his son: "All I need is to slightly change my vantage point, to switch my perspective a tiny degree, and this place and this motive become endless. I could spend here painting the rest of my life".

Walt Whitman's poem 'Crossing Brooklyn Ferry' was written before the Brooklyn bridge was built— in advance, his poem bridges. There is some kind of *Fergendienst* (as Paul Celan called the work of the translator) happening here. Relating mediation, Whitman achieves immediacy. The crossing described in the poem is enacted by the poem: "What is it then between us? What is the count of the scores or hundreds of years between us?". The commuter author addresses his fellow commuters in the Brooklyn Ferry, who later become all persons no longer bound to distance, place or time— all eventual ferry crossers. They further become his future readers too, in a movement of address from the visible to the invisible.

There is also a complex reflection about identity in Whitman's poem, stemming probably from the author's complicated identity as homosexual man: "I too had been struck from the float forever held in solution…"—a chemical figure of a solid precipitated from a liquid. "I too had receiv'd identity by my body". Before the bond that a similar cultural background or ethnicity could bring, the translator authorises her labour because of empathy, because of a love beyond bodies.

Why such impositions upon the work of a translator? "The reason translation is so overcoded, so overregulated, is that it threatens to erase the difference between production and reproduction which is essential to the establishment of power", reflects Lori Chamberlain. The recent controversies of identity politics that aim to impose

themselves with demands are a time-specific update of a totalitarian tone of speech. Currently commonplace in social media, they have become a face of the establishment. But “translation is anachronistic; it happens in real time and across time; it happens backward; it changes he who takes and he who gives […] without the cover myths of a bounded, selfsame self, of the body as a fixed and permanent address”, writes Joyelle McSweeney.

So, a desired close encounter with intangible knowledge was suddenly supposedly not allowed. That is a cancellation we should cancel, I’d say. If we are ambitious in our approaches towards translation as creation (for, let’s also shed that misconception: all translators *are* creators), we should recognise the actual conservativeness that these controversies embody, not for shutting out disagreement, but for unveiling it, so as to transcend their time-and-place-specificities in Whitmanian fashion, so as to keep renewing the source that needs us for staying fresh, healthy to drink only if drunk, just like a violin gets spoiled if not played.

3. Some agenda

Andrés Claro’s invitation to translation regarded “as a language of kinship or active and irreducible interbreeding that redefines simple identity and sovereignty” is one I will follow.

In her essay ‘The Diva Mode of Translation’, Fiona Bell invites us as well “to start viewing translators as indispensable mediums […] just as nineteenth-century audiences relied on live singers to hear opera [before the age of recording].” She further elaborates: “Somehow, we’ve neglected our desire to surrender and be thrilled in our interactions with some of the most vital interpreters of our time: literary translators. […] By denying them the right to thrill us, we also deny ourselves a more joyous and complete relationship with literature.”

As a reverberation of Bell’s ring, I think we should work towards a future in which translation is acknowledged as the blood-flow of cultural exchange and that its actors, the translators, become ever more evident and relevant in society. In which for starters, they are featured in publications not only as equally important as the authors they translate, but beyond, eventually as luminaries of cultural transmission. Because translation as loving and critical praxis keeps communication and identity as open questions so as to keep their complexity and not fall into rigid, conservative views.

My first intensive experience of translation was with the poetry of John Ashbery, whom I was fortunate to correspond with and meet personally. I think it was when talking with him in his New York flat that he told me the following: early in his creative writing workshops, he would distribute photocopies of Egyptian hieroglyph tablets to his students, later asking to translate a poem from them. Through exercises such as Ashbery’s between languages unknown and known, both verbal and non-verbal, translation could likewise be implemented in high- and even elementary schools. Because translation is both a necessity and an impossibility that is always happening, not only in literature but also in our minds between every thought and word, between a dream as dew during the morning and the way it evaporates while told in the afternoon.

#Lyrik



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