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Translation of Poetry as Sacrilege

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What passes for translation of poetry is a convention of approximate analogies, a rough-cast similitude, just tolerable when two relevant languages or cultures are cognate, but altogether spurious when remote languages and far removed sensibilities are in question.

—George Steiner

*After Babel*

Recently I read that because poetry is so altered by translation the translator commits a sacrilege, an offense against the poem and poet. What happens to the meaning and form of the poem is a crime against the spirit. Translation of poetry is in the words of George Steiner, possible yet impossible. To translate poetry is to serve two masters: not only form and meaning, but also two languages, two cultures.

When I first read Rilke in English, after hearing so much about him, I was disappointed. But when I read those same poems in German, I realized the fault was not in Rilke, but in the translation. The subtleties of the language had been lost, and with it the beauty.

Many say that language is not the vehicle for thought, but its determining medium. We think and feel as our particular language allows us. Every language has a definite rhythm all its own.

When thinking about translation of poetry, I am always reminded of Tess Gallagher's "Poem on Translation":

In the new language, you are awkward,
you don't agree with yourself,
these versions of what you meant
to say. Like a journalist, one has written
"throat" where you have said
"throat." Another uses his ears
as mouth; he writes like an orator
in a bathroom, not "tears"
But "sobbing".

This excerpt expresses quite well the hazards of translating poetry:
even equivalent words have different meanings—and different shades of meaning—in different languages. The best translations are rarely good enough. Music and meaning are frequently lost: all those beautiful gaps and silences gone. In trying to get all the shades of meaning and mood the translator has to be careful not to go too far. He must not embellish on the poem to the point of ridiculousness and make the poem over-emotional, forgetting the intentions of the poet. A translator translated a line from a poem by Eugenio Montale as “a snappy refrain/ of castanets”. There was no “snappy” in the original. The rhythm implied it. But the translator wanted to make the sound of castanets as clear to us as it was to him in the original.

Later in Gallagher’s poem, she writes of the hazard of knowing the language “too well/to say anything simply.” Rigid adherence to the literal meaning and form is perhaps the worst error a translator of poetry can make. What comes out is not poetry. Once I was asked by a professor to translate some lines from Goethe. After I did he said “you got all the words right, but killed the poem.” Exact translation and formal syntax sometimes must get left behind. A poem by East German poet, Sarah Kirsch, begins:

Nachmittags nehme ich ein Buch in die Hand
Nachmittags lege ich ein Buch aus der Hand

Translated literally this means:

Afternoons take I a book in the hand
Afternoons lay I a book out of the hand

This is an exaggeration, but it shows that a translator has to step back from the original. And if necessary, transpose. Dudley Fitts states that what he tries to do “is state in my own idiom what the verse meant to me.” The translation must be given an equivalent beauty. Free translation of poetry is often not an indulgence, but a duty.

To translate is to replace one view of the universe with another as equivalent as possible. The translator must have feeling for what to sacrifice and what to preserve.

In his fourth volume of Haiku, R. H. Byth writes briefly about the problem of translating haiku, one of the most stylized forms of poetry. He gives three versions of a haiku by Basho he translated:

The old pond;
A frog jumps in,—
Here is the essential problem with translating poetry: it seems simple and each one of these translations seems close, to one who doesn’t know the original in Japanese. Yet with each Blyth finds fault.

The first lacks continuity and a feeling of the whole when dealing with parts. The second makes the sound the most important element when perhaps it wasn’t in the original. The last is too exact, too definite. What these translations lack are the spaces and fragmentary nature of the original haiku. They lack something that Blyth, no matter how hard he tries, cannot give them.

Schopenhauer said that one can’t translate poems but only transpose them. Once, when translating a German poem, I had to find an equivalent word for the German “Becken.” The first word that came to me was “basin.” But I found it also could mean “pelvis” or “vortex.” All these meanings were present in the original poem. I never resolved the problem to my satisfaction.

Another problem I frequently come across in translating German poetry is exclamation points. German poets love them. American poets do not. They look silly. Take them out, my fellow poets tell me. Leave them in, say those who have the German language as their first love. They are essential to the meaning.

So why do I bother to continue to translate given these inadequacies and problems? One reason is because when I translate I slip into the clothes of the poet I am translating. I lose myself. It is almost as good an escape as reading a detective novel, except I have to use my craft as a poet.

But more seriously, translating is a great discipline for a poet, especially when going through a dry period of writing. It is, as Kenneth Rexroth wrote, “a way of keeping your tools sharp until the great job, the great moment comes along. . . .” The writer “who can project himself into the exaltation of another learns more than the craft of words. He learns the stuff of poetry. He keeps his heart alert.”
Identifying strongly with another person and taking that person's utterance and making it my own is an act of sympathy. This not only enriches me as a person, but as a poet. Making sense out of the thoughts of others—going beneath the exterior differences of two languages and cultures to bring out the beauty and absolute meaning of a poem is very much like writing my own poems. When I am successful, it is a transcendence of boundaries.

Despite the inadequacies of translating poetry, to recreate that poem in a new language, to give it an equivalent beauty, power and truth is an answer to isolation. Something passes over and translation becomes a courier for the human spirit. To dismiss the validity of it, because it is not always possible and never perfect, is absurd. The art of poetry is not always possible and hardly ever perfect, but there is that essential need for communication in all of us.