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Lost in Translation? Found in Translation? Neither? Both?

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TQC Questionnaire.



*"Lost in translation"; "Found in translation":
Are these just useless commonplaces or are they
indicative of something relevant to your own practice?"*

Esther Allen

To say that much is "found" in a translation may seem to redress the negative view expressed in the commonplace of things being "lost." To my mind, both phrases are worse than useless; they confirm a painfully restrictive and impoverishing concept of language and meaning.

The idea of things being "found" or "lost" presupposes an original entity with characteristics that are tangible, measurable, and finite, the text a pile of meaning to be shifted from one location to another. In some cases, a few bits of meaning are missing; in others, a few have been added. In this schema, it's perfectly plausible that there might be exactly the same number of bits of meaning, the one pile perfectly equivalent to the other. I, the bilingual reader, can readily discern precisely how many bits of meaning are in each pile and thus determine whether anything has been subtracted or added. Can't I?

Of course this is not how meaning, particularly literary meaning, works. That's another of our most hallowed literary clichés! When you re-read the classics, you find something new every time—right? A reading, any reading, whether it takes place in the language the text was first written in or a different one, is a highly complex encounter between the text, the reader and the context—historical, political, and personal. The text is not *there* in the words on the page but has meaning only within a context (our lives, the history of the world) that continually alters it.

In the performance of a play, various aspects of the script might be distorted, diminished and/or heightened and enhanced. Since we think of plays as having been written *in order to be performed*, we tend not to think of the unperformed script as the *real* play, which has been either "lost" or "found" by the current director, set designer and cast. We're far more likely to assess what the current staging wants to tell us, about ourselves and our time, about the play. We're free to discuss the intentions, purpose, talent and taste of those involved in the production, and while we might measure it against other productions we've seen, we're unlikely to measure it against some abstract notion of an original. I've seen a *Hamlet* in which the title role was played simultaneously by four men and a woman; the discussion

afterward was about whether or not this worked dramatically and the dialogue that it established with contemporary gender issues—not about whether the production had lost or found the true meaning of Shakespeare’s 17th-century text.

Why is it so difficult for us to think of the written performance of written texts that way?

A language is something other than a grammar textbook and the dictionary definitions of its words. Language is not a technological device but an organic entity that exists through the bodies and brains of all its speakers, lives and dies with them. A text isn’t a compendium of information to be more or less accurately repeated but a living creature, evolving and transforming in and with its readers, if it is lucky enough to have any.

When we think of a translation as a proposed reading of a work that has no single definitive reading, in its own language or any other, the question of what’s been lost or found (which presupposes some common and definitive knowledge of what’s *there to begin with*) doesn’t arise. Instead, our discussion is of purpose, talent, style, taste and other performative and interpretative qualities. What does this reading tell us about ourselves and our time? What dialogue does it establish with the original text and the original language? What is its intention, what is it trying to do? What form of representation has it chosen? As translators, as readers, we have no alternative but to re-invent, re-stage, transform; we can’t simply carry the text to another location and set it down, having shaken off or picked up a little dust along the way.

Heraclitus tells us, in a translation at several removes from his words (if he ever actually uttered them), that we can never step into the same river twice. The same goes for the hitheringandthithering rivers of words that lie motionless on our bookshelves and behind our computer screens, waiting for us to step into them once more.

Esther Allen is an Associate Professor at CUNY’s Baruch College and an award-winning author, editor and translator. She is the recipient of the Feliks Gross Endowment Award from City University of New York, two National Endowment for the Arts Translation Fellowships, and a Fellowship at the Cullman Center for Scholars and Writers at the New York Public Library. Allen is also co-founder of PEN World Voices: the New York Festival of International Literature and has been named a Chevalier de l’ordre des arts et des lettres by the French government. Her works include *In Translation: José Martí: Selected Writings* (Penguin Classics, 2002), *To Be Translated or Not To Be* (Institut Ramon Llull, 2007), and *Translators on their Work and What It Means* (Columbia University Press, 2013).

Mary Ann Caws

Clearly, for almost everyone on the planet, without translation, there's no reading except in one's own small/medium/large or rarely extra large domain.

One's shrinkability is more immense than one's linguistic powers, obviously but necessarily speaking.

Mary Ann Caws is Distinguished Professor of Comparative Literature, English, and French at the CUNY Graduate School, a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the recipient of National Endowment for the Humanities, Fulbright, Guggenheim, Rockefeller (Bellagio) and Getty Fellowships. Her many works include The Modern Art Cookbook (Reaktion Books, 2013), Surprised in Translation (University of Chicago Press, 2006), and biographies of Marcel Proust, Virginia Woolf, Salvador Dali, Pablo Picasso and Henry James.

Peter Constantine

When Genghis Khan gave his "I am the scourge of God" speech in the great mosque of Bukhara in his Mongolian language all the citizenry fell to its knees: not in reaction to the incomprehensible sounds that poured from his mouth, but in reaction to the clear and brilliant words declaimed by his translator, a formidable figure who through his translation could tip a nuance this way or that and change the course of history.

But how safe was this translator whose words could bring a nation to its knees? What if the Khan didn't like one of his translations?

When Xerxes and his Persian army marched on Athens, Xerxes sent a translator to demand from the Athenians "earth and water," or, more idiomatically: all the Greek territories and sea zones under Athenian command. The Athenians, outraged to hear the Greek language defiled, voted to have the translator put to death. They punished him by taking his translation literally, and he was given a mud pit of "earth and water" where he was left to drown.

It may seem to us that Genghis Khan's translator had a luckier fate, but, then again, we don't know what happened to him.

Peter Constantine is a Guggenheim Fellow and a literary translator and editor who has won many awards for his translation works, including Six Early Stories by Thomas Mann (recipient of the PEN-Book of the Month Club Translation Prize, 1997) and Undiscovered

Chekhov: *Thirty-Eight New Stories* (winner of the National Translation Award, 1999). He has edited and translated many other texts into English from Albanian, Ancient and Modern Greek, Dutch, French, Italian, German, Russian and Slovene. He is currently working on translations of *Augustin's Confessions* and *Alexander Solzhenitsyn's autobiography Between the Millstones: Sketches of a Life in Exile*.

Edith Grossman

The answer to both questions may be "yes"—the ideas are both commonplaces and relevant. As commonplaces, they tend to be bandied about by people who seem incapable of forgiving a translation for not being the original. I gave a talk the other day, and during the Q and A someone in the audience complained about the inadequacy of the translations into English of Neruda's poetry (I was surprised, since the subject of my talk wasn't Neruda or even poetry). I suggested that he learn Spanish and read the poems without a translator as intermediary, which seemed the only possible response.

I prefer not to think about what is lost; I don't know what that might be, but if I did, I certainly wouldn't lose it. I'd rather focus on what is gained. I believe the language into which we translate is enriched and expanded by the finessing and kind of thinking required to bring a concept or a statement or a particular word or phrase over into another linguistic universe. We stretch and push and reshape an already resilient English each time we translate, and if you'll forgive the pathetic fallacy, English appears to thrive on it.

Edith Grossman is the widely acclaimed translator of Spanish-language literature, including works by Nobel laureates *Mario Vargas Llosa* (e.g. *The Feast of the Goat*, Picador, 2001) and *Gabriel García Márquez* (eg. *Love in the Time of Cholera*, Knopf, 1988), as well as *Miguel de Cervantes's Don Quixote* (Ecco/Harper Collins, 2003). She is the recipient of the PEN/Ralph Manheim Medal for Translation (2006), the Queen Sofia Spanish Institute Translation Prize (2008) and a Guggenheim Fellowship for Translation (2008).

Nancy Kline

What is lost in translating the poetry of René Char (say) is French. Char's French, as it comes to him from the depths and surfaces of his life, in his inner voice and his outer voice, within his particular historical and cultural and personal context. Which is to say that everything is lost. But not to silence.

What is found is one version of a piece of French language transformed into a different language—English, say, the English of one translator, as she tastes and takes in René Char’s French, listens to him with all her ears (as the French might say), puts her words like lips against his and speaks what began as his words in her language. English is found. The umbilicus between the two languages: the poem.

Nancy Kline has published nine books, among them, a novel, a critical study of the poetry of René Char, a biography of Elizabeth Blackwell, and translations of Char, Eluard, Laforgue, Supervielle and Lorand Gaspar (forthcoming). Her short stories, memoirs and essays have appeared widely. She is a regular contributor to The New York Times Sunday Book Review and has received a National Endowment for the Arts Creative Writing Grant. For many years Director of the Barnard College Writing Program, Nancy Kline now teaches for Poets & Writers, the Bard Prison Initiative, and the Bard Institute for Writing & Thinking.

Burton Pike

Literary translation cannot be theorized, at least by translators. Every author, every book presents its own unique problems; one cannot generalize enough about the practice of translation to raise it to the abstract level of theory; theorizing translation must be left to the philosophers. Flannery O’Connor said that art—she means creating art—is a virtue of the practical intellect, and this is true for the translator as well. The translator, hemmed in by language and publisher, has to do his or her best.

In my view, a translator of literature should start not with the words, but with the rhythms of the text and the author’s voice within those rhythms, and once the translator has a sense of these, then fit the words to them. Each author and each text have their own resonances, and these resonances are a vital part of what the reader assimilates in reading, whether consciously aware of it or not.

*Burton Pike is professor emeritus of comparative literature and Germanic languages and literature at the City University of New York Graduate Center, and is the recipient of Guggenheim, American Council of Learned Societies and Fulbright Fellowships. His work on Robert Musil earned him the Medal of Merit by the City of Klagenfurt, Austria, and his translation of Gerhard Meier’s *Isle of the Dead* (Dalkey Archive Press, 2011) was awarded the Helen and Kurt Wolff Translator’s Prize in 2012.*

Damion Searls

Useless, sorry.

In practice, I have other things to think about while doing a translation. Just as, in talking about something that matters to me with someone I'm close to, I'm not thinking: "Lost in conversation?" "Found in conversation?" I'm pursuing the topic and/or working on the relationship with the other person.

In the criticism or analysis of translations, I think the cliché is worse than useless, because it relies on and reinforces a harmful premise: fetishizing the original and undervaluing the translator's work. If the translation is bad, it's not like the post office "lost" something in transit, and a good translation does more than just carry the whole cup across the room without spilling.

***Damion Searls** has translated twenty books from German, French, Norwegian, and Dutch, and is the language columnist for *The Paris Review Daily* blog.*

Karen Van Dyck

Translation

Eberhard Faber with your tiny ice cubes
that mean nothing but the sound of the words,
draw me a picture of how it felt to leave Germany
and come to New York. The smell of marzipan and bodies
in the kitchen makes me think you didn't ever really leave
and that sister of yours who screamed so loud
the first time she came – everyone in Charleston knew –
makes me think you didn't really ever come:
you were always halfway there.

by Karen Van Dyck

I wrote this poem in an attempt to think about how the diaspora brings words from one language into another and how this is and isn't like the task of the translator. I am particularly interested in the way meaning inheres in sound in multilingual literature and how this might be helpful for translators. What exactly is the status of the name Eberhard Faber in English or the phrase "tiny ice cubes" for the German boy? How do pronouncing these words with foreign accents help us make sense of the new world, while also making our own mark? How is speaking the foreign, like drawing a picture, a way of understanding immigration, but also acknowledging what is lost? The sister who "comes" in America, but

isn't fully satisfied, suggests that immigration and translation are acts that always leave one wanting more. But then the poem calls itself a translation. Does this mean that what is lost or not thoroughly assimilated can be found again on the page as a new poem? Is this one way that immigrant literature can help us rethink multilingualism and translation? And how is living between worlds gendered? What does it mean that a woman has written this poem called "Translation"?

Karen Van Dyck is Kimon A. Doukas Professor of Hellenic Studies at Columbia University, and is author and editor of several books on Greek literature and culture. Her works include *The Scattered Papers of Penelope: New and Selected Poems by Katerina Anghelaki-Rooke* (Anvil, 2008) and *Kassandra and the Censors: Greek Poetry since 1967* (Cornell University Press, 1998). She has also co-translated and co-edited a number of books, such as *The Greek Poets: Homer to the Present* (Norton, 2009) and *A Century of Greek Poetry: 1900-2000* (Cosmos, 2004).

Alyson Waters

Found in translation: Every book I have loved with a passion written in a language that I cannot read, or read only with difficulty. With enormous gratitude to the translators. Here is a list of a mere ten, off the top of my head:

Tibor Déry, *Niki: The Story of a Dog* (from the Hungarian)
 Tove Jansson, *The True Deceiver* (from the Swedish)
 Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis* (from the German)
 Andrea Camilleri, every one of the Inspector Montelbano books (from the Italian)
 David Albahari, *Snowman* (from the Serbian)
 Italo Svevo, *Confessions of Zeno* (from the Italian)
 Italo Calvino, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* (from the Italian)
 Cesar Aira, *Ghosts* (from the Spanish)
 Mikhail Bulgakov, *The Master and Margarita* (from the Russian)
 Knut Hamsun, *Hunger* (from the Norwegian)

Lost in translation: It's rather what is lost because of *not* having been translated: All those books that US publishers don't bother with because they don't think there is a "market" for them. For shame!

How does this affect my practice as a translator? It affects me as a reader, therefore it affects me as a writer, and thus affects me as a translator.

***Alyson Waters** is an award-winning translator of contemporary Francophone literature, lecturer of French at Yale University and Managing Editor of Yale French Studies. Her accolades include a National Endowment for the Arts Translation grant awarded for her work on Vassilis Alexakis's *Foreign Words* (Autumn Hill Books, 2006), a PEN Translation grant for her translation of Albert Cosseray's *The Colors of Infamy* (New Directions, 2011) and a Florence Gould/French-American Foundation Translation Prize for Erich Chevillard's *Prehistoric Times* (Archipelago Books, 2012).*

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