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TOPICS IN TRANSLATION 22

Editor: Geoffrey Samuelsson-Brown, *University of Surrey*

Literary Translation

A Practical Guide

Clifford E. Landers

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To my wife Vasda Bonafini Landers, who translated me into a translator

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La Dernière Translation

by Millôr Fernandes

When an old translator dies
Does his soul, *alma, anima,*
Free now of its wearisome craft
Of rendering
Go straight to heaven, *ao céu,*
al cielo, au ciel, zum Himmel,
Or to the hell – *Hölle* – of the great
traditori?
Or will a translator be considered
In the minute hierarchy of the divine
(*himmlisch*)
Neither fish, nor water, *ni poisson ni l'eau*
Nem água, nem peixe, nichts, assolutamente
niente?
What of the essential will this
mere intermediary of semantics, broker
of the universal Babel, discover?
Definitive communication, without words?
Once again the first word?
Will he learn, finally!,
Whether HE speaks Hebrew
Or Latin?
Or will he remain infinitely
In the infinite
Until he hears the Voice, *Voz, Voix, Voce,*
Stimme, Vox,
Of the Supreme Mystery
Coming from beyond
Flying like a bird *pássarouccelopájarovogel*
Addressing him in...
And giving at last
The translation of Amen?

– translated from Brazilian Portuguese by Clifford E. Landers

Preface

As the title states, this is a practical, not a theoretical, guide. While I have no quarrel with theorists, in theory at least, this is a get-your-hands-dirty, wrestle-with-reality type of book. *Literary Translation: A Practical Guide* is based on the following assumptions.

- (1) The direction of translation is *from* a given source language (SL) *into* English, the target language (TL). This does not necessarily assume that the translator is a native speaker of English. Though there are powerful arguments that one should always translate into one's mother tongue, there are enough counterexamples, both of authors (Conrad and Nabokov come to mind) and of translators to convince a fair-minded observer that this rule is not inviolable.
- (2) The goal of literary translation is publication. Translating for pleasure or as intellectual exercise is well and good, but the dedicated literary translator aims at sharing the final result with TL readers for whom the work would otherwise forever remain inaccessible. A portion of this guide is devoted to the question of how to go about finding an outlet for one's translations.
- (3) The translator possesses a working knowledge of a language pair – fluent English and a solid grounding in the SL. Convincing arguments can be made that thoroughgoing command of the TL is by far the more important of the two, and there are instances of translators producing excellent renderings of works, especially in the case of poetry, whose original language is complete terra incognita to them. An instance of the TL's paramount role in literary translation: when Gregory Rabassa was about to begin his exemplary translation of Gabriel García Márquez's monumental *Cien años de soledad*, he was asked if he thought his Spanish was good enough. 'What I wonder,' replied Rabassa, who was born and raised in the United States, 'is whether my *English* is good enough.'

In *Literary Translation: A Practical Guide*, both beginning and experienced translators will find pragmatic techniques for dealing with problems of literary translation, whatever the original language. The specifics of translating, say, Bulgarian, obviously differ from those of rendering French, Chinese, or any other language into English. But certain challenges and

certain themes recur in translation, whatever the language pair. This guide proposes to help the translator navigate through them.

Because a book about translation without examples is like a book about photography without pictures, illustrations, mostly from my language of specialty – Portuguese – appear frequently. They are meant not as models but as stimuli to thinking. The same kinds of associations and thought processes that ‘solve’ problems in one language are usually transferable to another tongue.

The quotation marks around *solve* are a reminder that translation problems are not like math problems that have only one or at most a strictly limited number of right answers. As a subfield of literature – and literature is indisputably an art rather than a science – translation is subjective in essence. Reasonable people may well disagree about which of several proposed alternatives to a particular translation problem best addresses it. Nevertheless, there are guidelines that can help us work our way through, to use a Borgesian metaphor, the seemingly infinite labyrinth of forking paths. That is the purpose of this book.

The Fundamentals

Why Literary Translation?

Why do literary translation? Consider:

NIGHT DRIVE **by Rubem Fonseca**

I arrived home with my briefcase bulging with papers, reports, studies, research, proposals, contracts. My wife, who was playing solitaire in bed, a glass of whiskey on the nightstand, said, without looking up from the cards, ‘You look tired.’ The usual house sounds: my daughter in her room practicing voice modulation, quadraphonic music from my son’s room. ‘Why don’t you put down that suitcase?’ my wife asked. ‘Take off those clothes, have a nice glass of whiskey. You’ve got to learn to relax.’

I went to the library, the place in the house I enjoy being by myself, and as usual did nothing. I opened the research volume on the desk but didn’t see the letters and numbers. I was merely waiting.

‘You never stop working. I’ll bet your partners don’t work half as hard and they earn the same.’ My wife came into the room, a glass in her hand. ‘Can I tell her to serve dinner?’

The maid served the meal French style. My children had grown up, my wife and I were fat. ‘It’s that wine you like,’ she said, clicking her tongue with pleasure. My son asked for money during the coffee course, my daughter asked for money during the liqueur. My wife didn’t ask for anything; we have a joint checking account.

‘Shall we go for a drive?’ I asked her. I knew she wouldn’t go – it was time for her soap opera.

‘I don’t see what you get out of going for a drive every night, but the car cost a fortune, it has to be used. I’m just less and less attracted to material things,’ she replied.

The children’s cars were blocking the garage door, preventing me from removing my car. I moved both cars and parked them in the street, removed my car and parked it in the street, put the other two cars back in the garage, and closed the door. All this maneuvering left me slightly irritated, but when I saw my car’s jutting bumpers, the special chrome-plated double reinforcement, I felt my heart race with euphoria.

I turned the ignition key. It was a powerful motor that generated its strength silently beneath the aerodynamic hood. As always, I left without

knowing where I would go. It had to be a deserted street, in this city with more people than flies. Not the Avenida Brasil – too busy.

I came to a poorly lighted street, heavy with dark trees, the perfect spot. A man or a woman? It made little difference, really, but no one with the right characteristics appeared. I began to get tense. It always happened that way, and I even liked it – the sense of relief was greater. Then I saw the woman. It could be her, even though a woman was less exciting because she was easier. She was walking quickly, carrying a package wrapped in cheap paper – something from a bakery or the market. She was wearing a skirt and blouse.

There were trees every twenty yards along the sidewalk, an interesting problem demanding a great deal of expertise. I turned off the headlights and accelerated. She only realized I was going for her when she heard the sound of the tires hitting the curb. I caught her above the knees, right in the middle of her legs, a bit more toward the left leg – a perfect hit. I heard the impact break the large bones, veered rapidly to the left, shot narrowly past one of the trees, and, tires squealing, skidded back onto the asphalt. The motor would go from zero to sixty in eight seconds. I could see that the woman's broken body had come to rest, covered with blood, on top of the low wall in front of a house.

Back in the garage, I took a good look at the car. With pride I ran my hand lightly over the unmarked fenders and bumper. Few people in the world could match my skill driving such a car.

The family was watching television. 'Do you feel better after your spin?' my wife asked, lying on the sofa, staring fixedly at the TV screen.

'I'm going to bed,' I answered, 'good night everybody. Tomorrow's going to be a rough day at the office.'

* * *

The pleasure of reading such a seemingly simple, brief, yet fully realized short story is something most of us would want to share with others. But if it is written in another language, access is limited to only those who read that tongue.

Its theme, the banality of evil, is delineated concisely and tellingly; no words are wasted – every detail adds to the totality of a setting and a life hurriedly glimpsed yet understood as much as any of us can understand the Other. It is a deceptively uncomplicated work that stays with and haunts us long after the few moments it takes to read. It, and the myriad of other fine pieces of literature appearing in hundreds of the world's languages, are the best argument for doing literary translation.

Why do literary translation? Of all the forms that translation takes – such as commercial, financial, technical, scientific, advertising, etc. – only *literary*

translation lets one consistently share in the creative process. Here alone does the translator experience the aesthetic joys of working with great literature, of recreating in a new language a work that would otherwise remain beyond reach, effectively 'in code,' in the metaphor of the celebrated Dutch novelist Cees Nooteboom.

By itself, is this enough to motivate a would-be translator? For the majority of those who do literary translation, the answer is yes. For others, the incentives may be more tangible. To begin with, literary translation eschews the anonymity of other areas of translation; uncredited book-length translations belong to an earlier, less enlightened time. Although glory is unlikely to attach to a translator's name, for better or worse he or she is now recognized as part of the literary world.

The intellectual rewards of translation (which, hereafter will mean literary translation unless otherwise specified) are many. For some, the pleasure of puzzle-solving is an important element. How to find an equivalent for a source-language pun? Can the tone of the original be reproduced in the target language? What to do about slang, nicknames, colloquialisms, proverbs, references to popular culture, metalanguage (when a language becomes self-referential, as for example an allusion to *tú* vs. *usted* in Spanish)? The delight, mental though it be, that a translator feels in cutting through any of these Gordian knots can best be described as somewhere between chocolate and sex – you choose their rank-order.

The literary translator can take heart from having expanded the potential readership of a novel from, say, the five million who read Finnish to the half a billion who read English as a first or second language. By rendering 'Passeio Noturno' into 'Night Drive,' the translator increased over fourfold the potential audience for the work, in the process making it accessible to students and researchers of comparative literature who may not read Portuguese. Finally, the new version may serve as source for translation into third languages (see 'Indirect Translation').

Some translate for the prestige. Seeing one's name on a title page just below that of a Nobel laureate is, well, heady, even if the author is long departed or, if living, far too busy to engage in dialogue with a translator. This is not to imply that major writers look down upon their translators, merely a reminder that English is not the only language into which outstanding literary works are translated.

Still others value translation for the relationships that can develop from it. The very first author I translated, Rubem Fonseca, whose story 'Night Drive' introduced this section, became a close friend, and that friendship has endured some 15 years. In many countries, writers are a small coterie, all of whom know one another. A successful translation of one writer's

works may often lead to referrals to other literati in the same circle, something that has happened with me consistently in the last decade. English is a prestige language, especially in developing countries, and writers are very cognizant of the role that translation into English plays in making their works known beyond their own linguistic boundaries.

As superficial as it may seem, some translators report that their activities give them access to a world they would never penetrate in their home countries. An ordinary citizen who would scarcely hope to have tea with literary luminaries of his own nation – John Updike, Joyce Carol Oates, or Norman Mailer – can interact socially and professionally with their equivalents in Denmark, Brazil, Egypt, or Romania. For often underappreciated word-workers like translators, this is a not inconsequential perk.

There are many reasons for doing literary translation, but ultimately only you can decide which ones impel you. As for money, it has been omitted from these deliberations because if it's your primary motivation for doing literary translation, you should choose another field. Much greater monetary compensation can be had in any of the other areas of translation; many people make a respectable living doing nothing but commercial or technical translation. While it's a cliché that literary translation is a labor of love, basically it *is*. Of the scores of literary translators I know, not one is motivated to exercise the craft primarily by bottom-line considerations. (At this writing, even the most prolific of living translators of Spanish- and Portuguese-language literature, Gregory Rabassa, whose output spans more than three decades, has not given up his university day job.) This is not to suggest that literary translation is philanthropic or totally uncompensated volunteer work, just that it should not be counted upon as one's main source of income. Financial aspects of the craft are discussed in a later chapter.

So, why do literary translation? For me, at least, to have the pleasure of introducing English-speaking readers to outstanding works like 'Night Drive.'

The uniqueness of literary translation

Literary translation, at least in the English-speaking world, faces a difficulty that texts originally written in English do not: resistance by the public to reading literature in translation. There is no need to belabor this point, so evident to publishers in England, the United States, and the other Anglo-Saxon nations. As Jorge Iglecias has said, 'To know we are reading a translation implies a loss of innocence.' This imposes a significant burden on the translator to overcome, and to do so means having a firm grasp on principles and techniques.

The anecdote in the Preface about Gregory Rabassa's feelings before he began translating *One Hundred Years of Solitude* illustrates one of the unique qualities that set literary translation apart from all other branches of translation. In addition to a thorough mastery of the source language, the literary translator must possess a profound knowledge of the target language. In reality, being in love with one or both languages, if not an absolute necessity, is a trait frequently found among the best and most successful literary translators. A lifelong love affair with words is one of the qualities that sets logophiles apart from others – e.g., journalists, publicists, copywriters – who may make their living dealing with the written or spoken word but whose attachment is often more utilitarian than the translator's.

One of the most difficult concepts about literary translation to convey to those who have never seriously attempted it – including practitioners in areas such as technical and commercial translation – is that *how* one says something can be as important, sometimes more important, than what one says.

In technical translation, for example, style is not a consideration so long as the informational content makes its way unaltered from SL to TL. The freight-train analogy is a useful one: in technical translation the order of the cars is inconsequential if all the cargo arrives intact. In literary translation, however, the order of the cars – which is to say the style – can make the difference between a lively, highly readable translation and a stilted, rigid, and artificial rendering that strips the original of its artistic and aesthetic essence, even its very soul.

Now that we have established that literary translation is the most demanding type of translation, a short digression. Why, I am often asked, does it pay less than the other branches? Shouldn't it be the other way around?

Let's not mince words. In some cases, rather than pay poorly, literary translation pays not at all. (Unlike novels, most of the short stories I've translated yielded not a cent.) And yet there is no shortage of aspiring translators ready to take the plunge. Literary translators are usually delighted to see their work in print, and for many this is reward enough. No exception to the law of supply and demand, literary translation is underpaid because so many are willing to do it for sheer pleasure. For comparison, think of the vast numbers of people who paint and how few earn a living at it. Yet neither painters nor literary translators are deterred from the pursuit of their art. Many literary translators are academicians, with the language background, necessary free time, and income to devote themselves to the activity. (There's no income in bird-watching either, but the pastime continues to grow.) There are far more people willing, even eager, to do literary translation than there are individuals who will pay them to do so, and outside the publishing world there is virtually no demand for literary translation. The result? As has been said before, if you're in literary translation for the money, you picked the wrong field. End of digression.

Consider some of the capabilities that the literary translator must command: tone, style, flexibility, inventiveness, knowledge of the SL culture, the ability to glean meaning from ambiguity, an ear for sonority, and humility. Why humility? Because even our best efforts will never succeed in capturing in all its grandeur the richness of the original. The description of translation attributed to Cervantes will always haunt us: a tapestry seen from the wrong side. If we produce a translation that approximates the TL text or stands as a literary work in its own right, that is the most that can be expected.

A simple SL phrase like Portuguese *Não vou lá* can be rendered in a variety of ways in English, from the highest grammatical register exemplifying 'refined' speech to the solecisms usually associated in the public mind with incomplete education and lower social status. Restricting ourselves only to subject-verb-complement order (there are other, less common possibilities: I go there not, there go I not, there I do not go, etc.), each variant slightly alters the effect:

- I do not go there.
- I don't go there.
- I am not going there.
- I'm not going there.
- I shall not go there.
- I shan't go there.
- I will not go there.

I won't go there.
 I am not going to go there.
 I'm not going to go there.
 I ain't going there.
 I ain't goin' there.

The choice from among this wide range of TL choices, any of which can conceivably be the most appropriate rendering of the SL phrase, hinges on a thorough grounding in context. As there is no way to say 'ain't,' for example, in Romance languages (though of course non-standard usages exist that convey similar social and intellectual clues about the speaker) native speakers at every level would fashion an identical phrase indicating unwillingness or lack of intent. But in the context of the work, it would be clear what level of discourse the individual, if speaking in English, would be likely to use.

More than in other branches of the translator's art such as legal, technical/scientific, financial/commercial, or in interpretation (simultaneous or consecutive), literary translation entails an unending skein of choices. And the same phrase, such as *não vou lá* may actually be translated differently each time it occurs – a cardinal sin in technical translation, where terms must be clear and unambiguous.

One example of the heightened sensitivity to nuance that marks literary translation can be found in the opening sentence of a short story by the Argentine writer Leopoldo Lugones (1874–1938) entitled '*Un fenómeno inexplicable*' (*An Unexplained Phenomenon*): *Hace de esto once años*. Selecting only from the high register that characterizes the work, here are some possible renderings of this seemingly straightforward phrase, each with a subtle if perceptible shading.

This happened eleven years ago.
 This occurred eleven years ago.
 This took place eleven years ago.
 Eleven years have passed/gone by since this happened/occurred/
 took place.

All these semantically interchangeable sentences convey the same information but differ significantly in aesthetic effect. Each is defensible, and each would have its defenders, but the literary translator must make a choice, and from a succession of such choices emerges the final product. Small wonder that since the Septuagint no two translations of the same literary work have been identical!

The role of choice in literary translation cannot be overemphasized. As

seen in the section 'A Day in the Life,' at every turn the translator is faced with choices – of words, fidelity, emphasis, punctuation, register, sometimes even of spelling. (In *A Samba for Sherlock* I debated for days whether to use *clue* or the quainter *clew* before opting for the former.) Breon Mitchell, a noted translator of German literature, devoted an entire article to decisions involved in merely the first two sentences of his retranslation of Franz Kafka's *The Trial*. As he comments:

The sad fact is that in spite of all the attention paid to the opening sentence, which is indeed rich in complexity, the sentence that follows poses an even greater difficulty for the translator: '*Die Köchin der Frau Grubach, seiner Zimmervermieterin, die ihm jeder Tag gegen acht Uhr früh das Frühstück brachte, kam diesmal nicht.*' For it soon becomes clear that including Frau Grubach by name seems incompatible with constructing an acceptable English sentence... When the Muirs [translators of an earlier edition] reached this stumbling block, they simply leaped over it: 'His landlady's cook, who always brought him his breakfast at eight o'clock, failed to appear on this occasion.'

The possible solutions are all terribly awkward. A literal version has little to recommend it: 'The cook of Frau Grubach, his landlady, who brought him...' Any attempt to smooth over the use of the genitive while retaining Frau Grubach's name only makes matters worse, creating grammatical monstrosities. We can hardly accept 'Frau Grubach's cook, his landlady, who...' or 'His landlady's cook, Frau Grubach, who...' or 'His landlady Frau Grubach's cook, who...' Yet a different approach dissolves into grammatical ambiguity as well: 'Frau Grubach, his landlady, had a cook who usually brought him his breakfast around eight, but this time she failed to arrive.'

In any other branch of translation this problem would not arise; the information would be conveyed irrespective of considerations of style. As John Bester has observed, as related to literature, *translation* denotes 'the attempt to render faithfully into one language (normally, one's own) the meaning, feeling, and, so far as possible, the style of a piece written in another language.' He goes on to add: 'I realize that this can only be an ideal. Translation, like politics, is an art of the possible; compromise is inevitable and universal.'

An ephemeral art

The half-life of a translation, it has been said, is from 30 to 40 years; every 30 years (or 40 or 50 – take your pick) the translation loses half its

vitality, its freshness, its ability to communicate to the reader in a contemporary voice. If this is true, it follows that major works of literature must be retranslated periodically if they are to retain their function as a bridge between cultures and eras.

For all its grandeur – and it was truly a fine example of the translator’s art, resounding with the masculine vigor of its prose – Thomas Hobbes’s 1629 rendering of Thucydides is virtually unreadable to the modern speaker of English, cluttered with *thee* and *thou* and complex, baroque sentences. The R. Crawley 1874 version is much easier to absorb but its slightly obsolescent vocabulary nonetheless gives off the faint scent of mothballs. Only Rex Warner’s lively 1952 translation communicates with fluency, precision, and modernity, speaking the contemporary reader’s language directly and forcefully. Is it therefore ‘better’ than the Hobbes or Crawley efforts?

Not necessarily. It is, however, newer and more in touch with the times in which we live. Even when the source text is in a dead language, the target language never remains static. Living languages are *moving* targets, and all we can say with certainty of today’s translations is that, however good they may be, they will at some future date become obsolete. In the memorable metaphor of Gregory Rabassa, ‘[T]here is a kind of continental drift that slowly works on language as words wander away from their original spot in the lexicon and suffer the accretion of subtle new nuances... The choice made by an earlier translator, then, no longer obtains and we must choose again.’

Far from a tragedy monumental enough to daunt a would-be translator, this is as it should be, for it affords every generation the opportunity to discover its own voice in a new translation. The oft-cited observation is apt: the Greeks have only one Homer; we have many.

The same process works both within and between languages. Some of Shakespeare’s vocabulary, and many of his allusions, are lost on today’s audiences, as David Crystal illustrates in his *Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language* (2nd edition), with the court jester Touchstone’s speech in *As You Like It*:

‘Tis but an hour ago since it was nine;
And after one hour more ’twill be eleven;
And so, from hour to hour, we ripe and ripe,
And then, from hour to hour, we rot and rot;
And thereby hangs a tale.

In Crystal’s words, ‘The bawdy pun involved can be appreciated only when we realize that *hour* and *whore* were pronounced alike, at that time.’

Shakespeare wrote ‘modern’ English, and even so, in the 21st century

most readers need a glossary to fully apprehend him. Chaucer borders on a foreign language; *Beowulf* requires serious linguistic study. A poet's chance at immortality, we may conclude, is greatest in a language that changes but little over the centuries.

Look at Andrew Marvell's wonderful poem '*To His Coy Mistress*.' The way the word *thorough* is articulated has changed so much since the 17th century that today's reader must choose between correct meter and correct pronunciation:

Let us roll all our Strength, and all
 Our sweetness into one Ball:
 And tear our Pleasures with rough strife,
 Thorough the Iron gates of life.
 Thus, though we cannot make our Sun
 Stand still, yet we will make him run.

The poem speaks of the time when '... worms shall try / That long preserved virginity, / And your quaint honour turn to dust, / And into ashes all my lust.' The modern reader loses much of the resonance of the original because *honour*, no longer a euphemism for the female genitalia, cannot do double duty as in Marvell's day. Also, *quaint* was a contemporary term for the female pudenda, while *lust* was by some accounts 17th-century usage for the male organ. All these secondary meanings have become shrouded in time. The poet, though writing in the same language of his modern readers, no longer fully communicates with them.

In the West, the Bible is the most universal example of the phenomenon of the slow decay of semantic integrity. Many of its agrarian allusions from a simpler time convey little to the inhabitants of a complex, modern, urban society. Or take the well-known citation 'Suffer little children ... to come unto me' (Matthew 19:14); lamentably, misunderstanding the word *suffer*, which at the time of the King James Version meant *allow*, some have interpreted this as a call to inflict regular beatings on children so they may 'come to Jesus.'

We neither can nor should rewrite the English of Shakespeare or Marvell. How fortunate, then, that we can retranslate the Spanish of Cervantes, the French of Villon! It matters little that all translations are fore-ordained to obsolescence. Their value to the future lies in their expression of how we spoke and thought and wrote in our own time. A good translation, like Warner's *Thucydides*, may well outlive its creator, and with luck our efforts may serve as the standard against which translations of the same work are judged long after we have heard Marvell's winged chariot hurrying near.

Now, let's talk about Getting Started.

Getting started

For many readers, perhaps a majority, this section is probably the reason you bought this book in the first place. Still, valuable as this guide hopes to be, it cannot make a translator out of anyone who is unwilling to put forth the effort and endure the frustration, occasionally rising to the level of angst, that comes with the territory known as literary translation.

Because there is no magic that instantly makes a person a translator, as a public service I hereby affirm and declare: *you are a translator*. Granted the assumptions mentioned in the Introduction, especially command of a language pair, you now have all you need to Get Started.

Or, to put it more accurately, you now have everything that the overwhelming majority of literary translators had when *they* got started.

The point to remember is that you get started by, well, getting started. A swimmer swims; a translator translates. As resistant as I am to sports metaphors, I recognize that one becomes a swimmer by plunging into the water, not by reading about it. You must translate something to become a translator; it is the act of translating that makes you a translator.

How many languages?

Before choosing what to translate, the question for some is what language or languages to translate. Although most native speakers of English won't encounter the 'problem,' those fortunate enough to have a multilingual background may possess the ability to translate from two or more languages into English. The question arises, then, whether a literary translator is better off concentrating on a single language or can successfully deal with two or more.

As is often the case, there are two sides to the issue. First, the argument for sticking to a single language.

- **Familiarity:** It is easier to become totally comfortable with one foreign language than with two, four, or more. Beyond the question of fluency in other languages, however, lies the greater issue of cultural familiarity. I believe that the truly bicultural individual is a near impossibility, for reasons too complicated to go into here. (See 'What literary translators really translate.') It takes years and extensive exposure to another culture to become conversant enough with it to translate its literature with confidence and accuracy.