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TRANSLATION AND STYLE

Understanding translation is embedded in the concept of faithfulness. What is a faithful translation? The traditional answer is Platonic, best represented in our day by the critic George Steiner, especially in his introduction to the *The Penguin Book of Modern Verse Translation* (1966). According to this view, the original poem exists in an ideal, static state, and the translator attempts to transmigrate this ideal totality into the second language. Since two languages never "mesh perfectly," a translation can never be completely successful; something is lost. Steiner quotes Du Bellay to that effect: "That it is untranslatable is one of the definitions of poetry. What remains after the attempt, intact and uncommunicated, is the original poem."

In this traditional approach, completely successful translations are rare, discontinuous, mystical happenings, "a medium of communicative energy which somehow reconciles both languages in a tongue deeper, more comprehensive than either."

The problem with the traditional, Steiner approach is that it is ahistorical, empirically incorrect. Major achievements and transformations in a language are often associated with translations. To cite only English cases, Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, Sidney's translations from Petrarch, the King James version of the Bible, Ezra Pound's *The Seafarer* from the Anglo-Saxon and *Exile's Letter* from Li Po, each of which played a key role in reorienting the English language.

These translations are based on a different concept of faithfulness. They fragment the original totality, starting with a conception of "lack." The translation senses a quality in the original language, reflected in the original poem, which the second language lacks. The translator is faithful to this conception and tries to recreate it in the second language. A translation in this sense starts with criticism and ends by pointing, not to the first, but to the second language. It explores the second language and, if successful, changes it by assimilating this lack. I define this kind of translation a transparent text.

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The ideal of transparent translation is not to be perfect in terms of a Platonic concept of wholeness but to create shifts in the second language. In fact, subtle distortions due to fragmentation and misreadings caused by the central vision of lack are integral parts of it, often pointing to some of its most successful moments.

One quality often regarded as a virtue in the traditional approach is a red flag of failure in the transparent translation: making the language of the translation so natural as though it were a poem written in that language, not a translation at all.

This is the sure sign of a bad translation, not worth reading. A successful translation must sound somewhat alien, strange, not because it is awkward or unaware of the resources or nature of the second language, but because it expresses something new in it. The best ones remain strange even after poems deriving from them make them more familiar. They affect the course of a language without being entirely part of it. A translation completely assimilated into the conventions, norms, of the second language, solely acceptable in its terms, is a failure.

This strangeness endures because in a transparent translation, style often precedes meaning, which, in the form of theme or feeling, is transformed when attached to stylistic expansion. A transparent translation always has an independent stylistic identity. This is why Walter Benjamin says in his essay, *The Task of the Translator*, that meaning is attached to a translation "loosely." In original poems, style appears contingent on meaning, more integrated with it.

In its suggestiveness describing the relationship between two languages during translation, Benjamin's essay is a powerful text. At its centre, it asserts that it is the foreignness of a work that makes it translatable: "The higher the level of the work, the more does it remain translatable, even if its meaning is touched upon fleetingly." This thought is one step from the concepts of lack and fragmentation, which define transparent translation. But Benjamin's ideas are, linguistically, intricately linked to, dominated by Hegelian idealism, which contradicts and finally thwarts their developments. He sees a perfect translation to reside in an ideal, pre-Babel state; a "hitherto inaccessible realm of reconciliation and fulfilment of languages." This concept is regressive in two ways. First, it retains the ghost of a perfect match, which his essay also negates. Steiner's introduction is a restatement of the idealistic side of Benjamin's text. Second, it leaves Benjamin completely silent on the relationship of the translation to the second language.

The present essay tries to demythologize Benjamin's *The Task of the Translator* from Hegelian idealism to the American practicality, by fragmenting and exploiting contradictions inherent in it. The focus here is the relationship of a translation, not to the first, but to the second language ----- different ways in which that language is altered and expanded.

The Seafarer is, along with the *Exile's Letter*, perhaps the major transparent translation in the twentieth century in English. Pound's focus in translating this poem is sound, the harsh sound he hears in Anglo-Saxon. *The Seafarer* is part of Pound's "heave to overthrow the iambic." The result is not a natural English poem recreating the syntax and the meter of the original; its purpose is rather to force a shift from vowels to consonants as the organizing principle of a poem in English. By making the substance of the language more palpable, through inversions and abundance of consonants, it opens the door to making language itself a subject matter, the equivalent of Picasso's and Braque's revolutions in sculpture, "Bosque taketh blossom, cometh beauty of berries." There is a direct link between *The Seafarer*, Louis Zukofsky, and the language poets.

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In a successful transparent translation, much more than the surface gets transposed: "He hath not heart for harping, nor in ring-having/Nor winsomeness to wife, nor world's delight..." "Winsomeness" is a medieval, not an Anglo-Saxon concept. In this subtle distortion, at this moment, *The Seafarer* is a translation from a Provençal poem.

The theme of exile itself is another dimension that *The Seafarer* transposes from Anglo-Saxon into English. Not only does it appear in the figure of Ulysses at the beginning of *The Cantos*, but, as Charles Bernstein pointed out, for Gertrude Stein, Louis Zukofsky, and Charles Reznikoff, English was not the language they grew up in. In fact, as writers, they tended to treat it as a foreign language. Their works can be seen as translations, transparent texts, from their alien language, English, into their private idioms, a reason for their strong stylistic identity. Their relationships to English are those of linguistic exiles. *The Seafarer* creates a shift in English which is not in the original. It points out that a plastic involvement with language entails a distancing between the writer and the language ---- and consequently between the writer and the audience. The Anglo-Saxon original was a poem accompanied by music, implicitly for an audience. *The Seafarer* is a poem to be read by an individual. Finally it is the most radical, significant bent Ezra Pound creates in the original.

I, Orhan Veli (Hanging Loose Press, 1988), consisting of my translations of poems by the Turkish poet Orhan Veli (1914-1950), is another example of a transparent translation. Its purpose is to alter intimacy, between reader and poem, by redefining colloquial speech. On the one hand, it possesses, I hope, the sounds, the smells, the music of a strange city, Istanbul; on the other hand, the voice feels very much as if it belonged to New York, like a New York voice.

voice.

This contradiction is at the heart of the shift *I, Orhan Veli* tries to create in contemporary colloquial speech. In American speech, colloquialism is often associated with natural speech. informality and streetwise humor. Though *I, Orhan Veli* reflects that, it also has a contemplative, melancholy, lyrical dimension. It is this dimension which is new and which sounds Turkish in the poems. It makes the colloquial speech as though the reader were walking side by side with the poet, overhearing his conversation.

This intimacy is reinforced by the way these translations alter the concept of poetic closure. Generally, Orhan Veli's poems and these translations end where the subject matter ends, not where the poetic tradition expects them to end. The result is a seamless clarity, language pushing away from itself, losing body, as though these were not poems but overheard pieces of conversation. This helps replace the figure of the exile, the solitary prophet, by a friend.

I, Orhan Veli's colloquialism is not really daily speech. It is a very terse, precise abstraction from it, its stylistic, plastic identity as a translation. The purpose of *I, Orhan Veli* is to create a clear hard-edged sharpness, also relaxed and intimate. It is an offshoot of the clarification, at moments the spiritualization, of language that Pound started in *Cathay*, particularly with Li Po's *Exile's Letter*, and which poets on and off ---- T.S. Eliot in the garden sequence of *Burnt Norton*, a good portion of Charles Reznikoff, John Yau's *A Suite of Imitations After Reading Translations of Poems by Li He and Li Shang-Yin* ---- try to continue.

Source : *Talisman*, 1991 (Spring 6), pp. 98-100.