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THE JOYS AND VEXATIONS OF THE TRANSLATOR'S CRAFT

Eliot Weinberger speaks on that "problematic necessity"

His formidable literary skills have been responsible for bringing Latin American literature to millions of readers. Yet his name does not appear on the covers of books, and he remains practically unknown.

Eliot Weinberger, renowned translator, essayist, and editor, was in Washington, D.C., in November to give a talk at the IDB Cultural Center tellingly entitled "Anonymous Sources–Translators and Translation."

Though much honored—the recipient of the PEN/Kolovakos Award for promoting Hispanic literature in the United States and the Order of the Aztec Eagle from the Mexican government, to name just two—Weinberger suffers from the same curse of invisibility familiar to all translators.

Weinberger told his IDB audience about the time he was stung by a reviewer's reference to translators as "that problematic necessity." Saying that the phrase sums up the prevalent view about translation, he went on to examine both aspects of the phrase, beginning with the part he felt was accurate, "necessity."

Translation is indeed a necessity, he said. No single person can know all the languages in the world, not even all the major languages. Moreover, speakers of other languages have things to say or ways of saying them that are unknown to nonspeakers.

Weinberger pointed out that poetic traditions from one culture have often entered and transformed another culture through translation. Not coincidentally, many of the golden ages in national literature have also been periods of prolific translation. For example, Sanskrit literature was rendered into Persian, which was translated into Arabic, which eventually emerged as medieval Europe's courtly love tradition.

In more recent times, poetry in translation has opened up windows to the world, "to walk through foreign gardens and pick flowers from them," said Weinberger. In China, for example, only socialist realism is allowed in original Chinese poetry, but foreign poets in translation have not been bound by the same rules. Translation can thus "liberate" the target language (what Weinberger referred to as the "translation language").

The paradox of multiculturalism. Weinberger provided an example from United States literary history. Around World War I, he said, U.S. poetry in translation overseas led to an appreciation of U.S. culture. But by the 1960s a backlash of anti-Americanism had struck. Meanwhile, foreign poetry in English translation became part of the American counterculture. There were more U.S. poets than ever, but none was being translated.

The decline of anti-U.S. sentiment led to a surge of nationalism, Weinberger continued. At the present time, total fiction translations into English amount to only some 200 books per year. Poetry translations total only about 25 per year. Although the 1960s and 1970s saw tremendous interest in English translations of Latin American fiction and poetry, no Latin American writer since then has been able to generate the same level of interest, Weinberger said.

The same is true of poetry. Latin American poets won an enthusiastic U.S. audience in the 1960s and 1970s, he said, and in the process they influenced U.S. poets. But today, Weinberger said, very few American poets are translating, and very little Latin American poetry is getting published in the U.S.

Weinberger attributes the decrease, oddly enough, to multiculturalism. While he fully supported the original multicultural critique of Eurocentrism, he noted that multiculturalism has not led to internationalism, but to a new form of nationalism. Instead of promoting foreign writers, the publishing industry promotes "hyphenated" American writers, foreign-born or of foreign parents. "I think publishers feel, oh well, we have this Latino writer, you know, what do we want a young Mexican or Peruvian writer for?"

Speaking the way you listen. "Translation," Weinberger said, "is not appropriation, but a form of listening that changes how you speak." For example, Mexican writer Octavio Paz–20 of whose works Weinberger translated over a 30-year collaboration–was influenced by such American poets as Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams.

Until the late 1940s, the U.S. perception of Mexico was through the eyes of English-speaking writers such as Huxley, Greene and Hughes. Then Mexican writers themselves began to be published in translation. Suddenly, "Mexico could be seen through Mexican eyes."

Inventing a new music. The "problematic" side of translation stems from the question of fidelity, since exact equivalents are often impossible. Weinberger pointed out that every reading, especially of poetry, is actually a translation into one's own experience. The etymological origin of the very word "translation" is "movement," which means "change." Poetry needs that movement to stay alive. "A poem dies when it has no place to go," said Weinberger.

"Translation makes the strange familiar," he said. The purpose of poetry translation is "to allow the poem to be heard" in the target language, "to invent a new music" in the target language, not to produce a technical replication. Trying to replicate the rhythm of a foreign language is "like having a hamburger in Bolivia," Weinberger said.

In the modern approach, poetry translations are written to be read as modern literature. An example is Pound's translation of Sappho without the traditional Greek pentameter. A bad

translation, said Weinberger, is one that may be semantically accurate but does not reflect a thorough knowledge of the target language literature.

Anonymous sources. Translators remain, as Weinberger put it delicately, the "geeks of literature," virtually invisible, anonymous toilers. For example, 90 percent of reviews of books in translation never mention the translator by name. Weinberger himself is no stranger to this neglect. When his award-winning translation of Borge's works was reviewed, his name was not even mentioned.

Translators have had to fight just to have their names featured and to receive a share of royalties, for instance, through the Translation Committee of the PEN American Center. In Weinberger's opinion, translation is a trade, in other words, professional–as opposed to clerical–work. This is a point the American Translators Association has fought hard to make in a long-running battle with the U.S. government to have translation recognized as a professional occupation.

The joy of translation. Weinberger noted that much is said about the problems of translation, but no one ever mentions the joy of translation. To him, it is the greatest education in how to write: you have to avoid the temptation to improve the text, which can be liberating because you can write without embarrassment.

Translation gives a writer critical distance, often pointing out errors or inadequacies. For example, in Weinberger's collaboration with Paz, who was himself a translator, Paz would dialogue with Weinberger about the English translation of his work, but always gave his translator the last word. "Paz knew English well, but knew that I knew it better," said Weinberger.

Weinberger described his work as a translator as "more like a tree surgeon than an oncologist": no disfiguring amputations, but a little trimming, some careful pruning. A translator, he said, "is an actor playing the role of author." Here he echoes another translator of Latin American literature, Suzanne Jill Levine, who wrote The Subversive Scribe–Translating Latin American Fiction. According to Levine, "translation is the most

concrete form of the interpretive act performed by all readers, scholars and teachers of foreign literatures."

Weinberger’s love of the profession made some of the technical translators in attendance want to run out and take a stab at their longstanding dream of translating literature. During a brief question-and-answer period, one attendee asked him about how to get started. Weinberger recalled how he himself started translating Paz as a high school student, to practice writing poetry. He recommended doing "something you feel passionate about" and then finding a publisher. Most Latin American poets, he said, would be thrilled to be published in English.

Reference : http://www.iadb.org/idbamerica/English/jan01E/jan01e15.html
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