

Stations of the Crossing: The Common Source in Nonfiction and Translation

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A reader of one of Samuel Johnson's works once supposedly wrote him to ask what he had intended by a certain passage in one of his works. In his response, Johnson wrote that when he was composing the passage, only two beings in the universe knew what was in his mind, himself and God, but now, looking back on it, God only knew what he was thinking just then. While the story may in fact be apocryphal, it can serve as a helpful point of departure in discussions about the intentional fallacy in fiction and poetry, that is, reading texts as if their meaning could be reduced to the intentions of an author. An author might, for instance, forget over time the things that went into the work other than the words put down on the page at the moment of creation. A more radical position might be to say that an author of an artistic work never really had any other way to express the thoughts in her or his mind than those that ended up on the page.

Let me follow this intentional trajectory for a moment and suggest that the question of intention both divides and unites translators and nonfiction writers, neither of which group generally has the rhetorical positioning available to them that fiction writers and poets do. Please follow my intention here—I've just made three claims: intention divides translators and nonfiction writers, intention unites translators and nonfiction writers, and translators and nonfiction writers do not generally have the rhetorical positioning available to them that fiction writers and poets do. These are all stations along the line I want to follow; I'll visit them one at a time.

Station one—the intentional divide. Here one finds a spectrum, at one end of which are intention-less translators and at the other, intention-full nonfiction writers. The former are usually seen as intermediaries of one kind or another, maybe miraculous maybe mechanical, but in neither case endowed with their own intention that might be separable from the voice of the text. For good or ill, people tend to read the translated voice as if it is the author's. Try to hear the voice of Larisa Volokhanskaya instead of Dostoevsky when reading *The Idiot* or the chorus of fifteen British Biblical scholars instead of the voice God or Jesus when reading "the Sermon on the Mount" (or as Becka McKay tells me it should read, the "Sermon on a Flat Place"), and you will immediately see the difficulty.

To the extent that translators might express intention of their own, their credibility is immediately called into question. In previous centuries,

some authors complained about the poor reading level of the public, who didn't understand that an "I" narrator was not necessarily the voice of the author. Translators don't usually have that problem: whatever intention people might read in a work is not generally theirs.

Loitering at the other end of this spectrum are nonfiction writers of various kinds. They are all intention. Their voice and the voice that people read in their work are nearly identical. To the extent that a nonfiction writer might draw back and say, maybe that is not completely my voice you're hearing there, her or his credibility immediately suffers. The Oprah memoir fiasco comes to mind, but other examples would not be hard to cite. In effect, the long battle waged by European fiction writers and critics to divorce the authorial persona from those of her or his characters is reversed. That battle culminated in the highly ironized aesthetics of high Modernism, in the context of which one finds statements like that of Nabokov that readers who identify with characters are minor readers.

For Nabokov and other like-minded Modernists, identification with characters or projection onto them or their authors are signs of unsophisticated reading practices. In the service of such an idea, Modernists deploy a whole range of rhetorical strategies that play on the separation between author and narrator, author and character—unreliability, self-reference, and so on, the whole panoply of mirrors and smoke that makes great modernist literature so appealing. And this is where intention in the work of translators and non-fiction writers can be seen as uniting the two.

We have arrived at station number two: the intentional union. To the extent that either translators or nonfiction writers engage in ironizing techniques that might be seen as privileging invention over something else—call it truth, fidelity, authenticity, what have you—their credibility as what it is they are claiming to be suffers. Intention in this case is directed toward creating a translator's or author's persona who is *telling the truth*, not *making things up*. Their problem would be similar in this case not to that of the Modernist author but rather to that of the nineteenth-century realist author, who might write something like, "I'm not a very good story teller, so I'll just stick to the facts," or "I wish Mr. Blank had not thought such a thing but I would be lying to you if I pretended that he hadn't." The convention here is one of having no conventions. And though the specific conventions deployed might be different, their intent in the case of translators and nonfiction writers is equivalent: "You can trust me," they proclaim. "I'm not making this up. I am telling the truth."

To ask the question, "the truth about what?" is to move onto the third station—call it Rhetoricville, which is the place from which we can see the differing rhetorical position available to translators and nonfiction writers on one hand, and fiction writers and poets on the other. This is the ground on which translators and nonfictors contrast most sharply with writers of pure fiction, especially those with Modernist affinities. While it is true that

fiction often has plenty of real life in it, and just about any story might be described somehow as “based on a true story,” the foreign language text and the “real life event” or data or fact or experience or place that provides the subject matter for nonfictions are in a different category. They exist on a different plain. If this were an academic paper, I would jump right in and call it a different ontological plain, but first things first.

To get at this difference and what it entails for the practice of the two kinds of writing these collected essays have been exploring, I have another story. In a very similar situation to that invoked in the Samuel Johnson episode at the start of this paper, Leo Tolstoy also once had a response for a reader who asked him what he had meant by some passage or other. His response was to write that if he wanted to explain in words what he had meant by the passage in question, he would have to write the whole novel again from the beginning.

Now, partly this is sheer Tolstoyan orneriness, just as the Johnson quote has a good dose of the self-deprecating ironic stand that makes him an attractive figure. But what I wish to point out is how Tolstoy highlights here the hollow ground behind his creation, which does not exist anywhere except in the form in which he put it. Paraphrasing any portion of it means abstracting the events and characters it depicts as if they existed on some plain other than the original text.

Translators and nonfiction writers, on the other hand, are only ever writing one version among many possibilities. Another person might come along and treat the same topic, place, event, data, or text tomorrow, and then another after that, and still another the day after. This may very well be because such writers actually have a subject to which their work refers. Phenomenologists claim that thought is only thought when it is directed at something. In the same way we might make the distinction I am trying to suggest by seeing the common ontological (there it is) nature of the source from which translation and nonfiction writing springs by contrast to the inventive weight that forms the ballast of the work of fiction writers and poets.

Some will claim the distinction is overdrawn, and I do not wish to insist on it as a division. Like all distinctions, it is only as helpful as the point of view it offers for looking and comparing, for the start of genuine investigation. Here let me suggest only that the all too frequently encountered impulse of translators and nonfiction writers to claim for themselves a status closer to that of the fiction writer or poet mistakes the nature of the source, or is blind to it. The very concreteness of their subject puts them in a different category, offering them a different set of expressive resources and encouraging a different set of skills, skills of writing and communicating, if not of living as well.