

Felipe Franco Munhoz (Brazil)
In and out of translation

Around eight years ago, I started studying Russian because a friend of mine, who teaches Russian, mentioned she was short of students. I would never say I fell in love with the language – but when you start learning a new language, any language, you open unexpected windows and you start learning different ways to read the world. I could never imagine that this Russian window would make a translator out of me and, from this open window, a few unexpected leaves would fall onto my own blank pages.

In 2020, during the very beginning of the pandemic, my bidimensional teacher suggested I translate, as homework, as a challenge, a couple of Alexandr Pushkin’s verses from one of his most well-known poems.

The professors who taught the punk rebellious kid I was in school and university, would be surprised. Not only did I *do* the homework but went as far as to translate the whole poem. Because with Pushkin’s language – with Pushkin’s music, beauty and precision; Pushkin’s sagacity, sarcasm and pain, and lust, and passion – I was actually falling in love.

The majority of Pushkin’s poems are written in iambic meter, which means that every other syllable is stressed. The majority of Pushkin’s quartets are composed by a rhyme with an oxytone word and a rhyme with a paroxytone word, randomly distributed within the four verses. The first of the quartets’ pairs of the poem in question (in this case, an iambic pentameter – each verse composed by ten poetic syllables) is:

Я вас любил: любовь еще, быть может,
В душе моей угасла не совсем;
Но пусть она вас больше не тревожит;
Я не хочу печалить вас ничем.

Beyond figuring out what was written in the poem, the goal I found joy in pursuing was to recreate the pattern in Portuguese: to dissect it with a melody’s scalpel and to rebuild it with distinct bricks. I built it and I destroyed it, and again, and again, and my first Pushkin quartet, survivor of a thousand versions, became:

Amei você: um amor, talvez, que ainda,

.....
International Writing Program Panel Discussion Series (Fridays 12-1 pm)
Iowa City Public Library

10/4/2024 – In and out of Translation

Felipe Franco Munhoz (Brazil), Zakariya Amataya (Thailand), Yassin Adnan (Morocco),
Nurit Kasztelan (Argentina)

aqui, de todo, não se desgastou;
porém, retiro o estorvo — angústia finda;
poupar-lhe de qualquer tristeza eu vou.

By then, in lockdown, I was already writing a book [that would be my third book, *Lanternas ao nirvana*] in which I was making an effort to carve multiple characters' points of views – and attitudes – regarding the pandemic.

My own writing, blurring boundaries, combining drama, poetry with fixed forms, visual poetry, images etc., to compose, with fragments, a kind of a narrative arch, is more connected to avant-garde movements; meanwhile, for almost all fragments, breathing with an Oulipo lung, I'm always pushing myself to pre-establish a restriction – always trying to match form and content, related to the fragment's atmosphere: a fixed form, usually, forces the writer to discard first ideas (that, usually, are the less interesting ones).

To count syllables, to pan for rhythm and rhyme, was part of my routine.

And after the Russian class's challenge, hooked by Pushkin (even though most of the time I felt as if I was a completely lost Bill Murray), it was difficult not to translate more of his poetry. So: for the rest of the 312 days that I didn't leave, not once, the apartment where I was living in, I was working in and out of translation: writing my own book and translating Pushkin; allowing Pushkin's voice to merge into my literature *and* transcreation of Pushkin's verses (having to cut words, to invert sentences and, even, to add some bit parts).

Out of translation

Consciously, I allowed Pushkin's voice to merge into my writing – but in a sense that I was both *applying* his traits and *exploding them*, and mixing them with stage directions, and enveloping them with soundtracks.

In translation

About Pushkin translation: since there are millions of possible paths to translate any literary work, no translation is definitive; mine, is only one approach; it's as if a reader of Portuguese – that can't reach Pushkin in

.....
International Writing Program Panel Discussion Series (Fridays 12-1 pm)
Iowa City Public Library

10/4/2024 – In and out of Translation

Felipe Franco Munhoz (Brazil), Zakariya Amataya (Thailand), Yassin Adnan (Morocco),
Nurit Kasztelan (Argentina)

Russian – could read Pushkin’s voice through the filter I’m suggesting, through my voice.

Out of translation

And about my own writing: perhaps the most interesting thing, after all, is that *Lanternas ao nirvana* wouldn’t be the same book as it is if, eight years ago, I didn’t open the Russian window, and if a little later, I wasn’t hooked to Pushkin’s tone. It’s evident that’s impossible to tell how it would be without Pushkin, but I’m sure that now, when I face a blank page, there he is –

along with a mosaic of other authors’ eyes,
artists whose language I love,
Pushkin’s eyes are, sharply,
facing me back.

.....
International Writing Program Panel Discussion Series (Fridays 12-1 pm)
Iowa City Public Library

10/4/2024 – In and out of Translation

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Nurit Kasztelan (Argentina)

In and Out of Translation: Zakariya AMATAYA (Thailand)

'Without translation, we would be living in provinces bordering on silence.'

— George Steiner*

It happened while I was studying Islamic Sciences & Arabic Language and literature at Darul Uloom Nadwatul Ulama in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, India. It was on the first day of the last semester of my undergraduate study, that my maulana (or master) asked everyone in class.

“After graduating, what are you going to do?”

Some of my friends replied that they would start a worldly career, but most of them said they would serve a religious duty by becoming an Ustaz, or religious teacher. My maulana then turned to ask me. I stood up and said, “I will be a bridge”. Then I remained silent as my master looked at me with wonder and doubt, while all my friends were as quiet as a grave.

After a few moments, I explained that “I want to be a bridge that connects between one people to another, a bridge that crosses from one language to another.” As I was saying this, in my head I meant I wanted to become a translator -- translating books or verses or any written text.

After my graduation, I returned to Thailand and continued my study in Comparative Religion. I also started reading and writing poetry in various original languages, namely Arabic, Malay and English. I read and translated some of these poems. The more I did this, the more experience I gained in translation, and unknowingly, and little by little, I realized that my translation functioned as a bridge not only between those languages, but also a bridge that connected myself to my adventure as a poet who writes in the Thai language.

Let me give a background on Thai poetry. We have a long history of poetic verses. Thai poetry dates to the Sukhothai period (13th–14th centuries) and flourished under Ayutthaya (14th–18th centuries), during which it developed into its current forms. The Thai poetical medium consists of five main forms, known as โคลง klong, ฉันท์ chan, กาพย์ kap, กลอน klon and ร่าย rai; Almost all have rules governing the exact meter and rhyme structure. So we (Thai people) are very proud of Thai poetry, in school we learn how to compose poems in traditional, classical forms. But schools don't teach "modern poetry" or

.....
International Writing Program Panel Discussion Series (Fridays 12-1 pm)

Iowa City Public Library

10/4/2024 – In and out of Translation

Felipe Franco Munhoz (Brazil), Zakariya Amataya (Thailand), Yassin Adnan (Morocco),
Nurit Kasztelan (Argentina)

"free verse poetry", of which I'm a practitioner. Most Thai poets write in the traditional form, maybe just 20% or 30% write in the modern form.

So why is the translation of modern poetry of any language to Thai language very important to our readers. To me, I think a poet can learn a lot from studying translation, both translating OUT to a different language and translating IN to our language.

To elaborate on this: can translation transcend cultural differences?

I do not believe that translation can completely transcend the original work, but I think it can connect some cultural differences. However, I believe we need to try to transcend or cross these spaces.

A few weeks ago, I joined International Translation Workshop, I found that my poem "Posthumous poems from paradise" was hard to translate into English, because there are gaps in cultural differences that cannot be crossed -- something more than words that cannot be reached through "the other language". Still, Ko Ko Thett and I worked hard and tried to do our best to bridge those gaps.

As I'm talking to you right now, I'm also translating my own thoughts into English, struggling to cross the bridge in my head and my heart, the bridge that I sometimes fall under, then I struggled to climb back on it again.

And fruitful from translation of my poetry OUT to English, that bring me here to International Writing Program.

At last, let me recite a poem (in my language?)

The Missing

There must be something in this universe
That has strayed from the dimension of time
Something Columbus and Ulysses missed in their explorations
Something Greek and Arabian astronomers failed to discover
Something the world's prophets forgot to preach
Something that vanished between the black holes of space

.....
International Writing Program Panel Discussion Series (Fridays 12-1 pm)

Iowa City Public Library

10/4/2024 – In and out of Translation

Felipe Franco Munhoz (Brazil), Zakariya Amataya (Thailand), Yassin Adnan (Morocco),
Nurit Kasztelan (Argentina)

Some mistake must have occurred
Between the seams of the human race
That went missing at the time of the Flood
Something that failed to board Noah's Ark
Something unrecorded in the ancient Holy Book
Something Nostradamus forgot to predict

There must be some misunderstanding on this earth
That has been lost from the archives of humanity
Something Plato did not anticipate
Something Nietzsche failed to mention
Something Einstein could not calculate
Something is missing...

**Francis George Steiner, was a Franco-American literary critic, essayist, philosopher, novelist and educator.*

.....
International Writing Program Panel Discussion Series (Fridays 12-1 pm)
Iowa City Public Library

10/4/2024 – In and out of Translation

Felipe Franco Munhoz (Brazil), Zakariya Amataya (Thailand), Yassin Adnan (Morocco),
Nurit Kasztelan (Argentina)

On Literary Translation:

Scattered Thoughts and Paradoxes

Yassin Adnan (Morocco)

-1-

Since the first complete French translation of Antoine Gallant's, *The Thousand and One Nights*, appeared in 1704, followed by successive translations into English, German, Danish, and other languages, Arab culture has been transformed. *The Thousand and One Nights*, which in our Arab countries was considered a marginalized oral folk text, not counted as high literature, has become a unique, intriguing literary reference in many languages, cultures, and among various peoples. I can point to its great influence on a number of English writers such as Walter Scott, Lord Byron, John Keats, and Thomas More, just to name a few. There are even those who crowned it the first Arabic book. Thus, the Arab literary establishment was forced to change its position on the book, not from literary conviction, but because of the power of translation, and under the direct influence of the strong echoes of the translations of *The Thousand and One Nights*. I wish to start with this example because it illustrates how translation can affect not only the recipients and receivers in the target languages, but also the literary consciousness of the environment from which it is translated. In short, it was the translations and Western reception of *The Thousand and One Nights* that revived it in the Arab creative consciousness and forced our official literary establishment to come to terms with and rehabilitate this work.

.....
International Writing Program Panel Discussion Series (Fridays 12-1 pm)

Iowa City Public Library

10/4/2024 – In and out of Translation

Felipe Franco Munhoz (Brazil), Zakariya Amataya (Thailand), Yassin Adnan (Morocco),
Nurit Kasztelan (Argentina)

-2-

When we receive a good piece of news, we say in English that the news is “heartwarming”, and the same in French. “Les bonnes nouvelles réchauffent le cœur.” But if we translate this phrase into Arabic, literally, word for word, the result will be bad and unpalatable. In Arabic, we say: هذا الخبر يثلج الصدر
Which means, literally: This great news ices my chest.

In the hot countries of the Arab world, cold and ice are a source of refreshment, unlike in the languages of cold regions, where people enjoy warmth - which creates feelings of pleasure and happiness. So, sometimes a translation has to betray the original structure in order to convey the meaning, intent, and connotation.

-3-

In my country of Morocco, translation is a sensitive topic, almost related to national reconciliation. We have two elite groups in the country, one that writes in Arabic and one that writes in French. Each group has its own socio-economic, intellectual and ideological background, and its own audience and readers. Unfortunately, we do not possess any institution, fund, or national translation mechanism which allows us to translate our works from Arabic to French, and vice versa. We ask for this, not for the sake of literary popularity, but so that Moroccans can read their writers in both languages and complete the circle of reception.

This would contribute to national linguistic reconciliation, which would undoubtedly reduce social misunderstandings and reflect positively on the general consciousness of Moroccans. Translation can play a key role in this regard.

However, there is a harsher paradox for Moroccan writers who write in Arabic: they have little luck with translation. This is because publishers of books in a number of languages are only interested in Arabic literary works after they have been translated into French. I don't know why English, American and

.....
International Writing Program Panel Discussion Series (Fridays 12-1 pm)

Iowa City Public Library

10/4/2024 – In and out of Translation

Felipe Franco Munhoz (Brazil), Zakariya Amataya (Thailand), Yassin Adnan (Morocco),
Nurit Kasztelan (Argentina)

German publishers have such blind faith in their French counterparts. I can't find a plausible excuse or justification for it.

But what is even more surprising is that French publishing houses, in the limited quotas they allocate for translating Arabic literature, look for works from Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and the Gulf countries, and generally exclude works from the Maghreb.

But why?

Because they consider that Moroccans, Tunisians and Algerians write directly in French. Therefore, they don't need translation.

This is how we, the Arabized writers of the Maghreb, are condemned to permanent house arrest in our mother tongue. For example, the prestigious French publisher Actes Sud, in its collection of Arabic literature, has translated only three Moroccan writers. I am fortunate to be one of them, the last to join with my novel *Hot Maroc*. If it were not for that, I might not have crossed over into English, and my novel would not be on display on the shelves of Prairie Lights bookstore today.

.....
International Writing Program Panel Discussion Series (Fridays 12-1 pm)

Iowa City Public Library

10/4/2024 – In and out of Translation

Felipe Franco Munhoz (Brazil), Zakariya Amataya (Thailand), Yassin Adnan (Morocco),
Nurit Kasztelan (Argentina)

In and out of translation: Things I Discovered through the Process Nurit Kasztelan (Argentina)

*The task of the translator consists in finding the particular intention
toward the target language which produces in that language the echo of the original.*

Walter Benjamin

I believe in fate. I know that this may be a polemical sentence for a writer to say but I do. It usually means that things happen for a reason, so I must believe that even though I wanted to speak about nature and how a landscape can shape the way we see life and mold our own literature; for some reason I am supposed to speak about translation.

When we went to the art exhibition at the Stanley Museum, the Korean artist emphasized: *Not to be too comfortable in what you are doing well.* So maybe *Nature* is an old topic for my writing. It's been one year since my novel was published and I have a new novel in my head. It's about a woman who is emptying her dead mother's house and I am not yet sure about the shape it will take; or if it is going to be an auto fictional novel or not. When I started writing it, I decided the main character will work as a translator and that I will combine autobiographical facts with some translation theory. Because what usually happens when you are in mourning, is that you lose your own language and the way you used to name things is no longer possible. And at the same time, you are reconstructing yourself, you need to find a new way of naming things.

For this panel, I decided to share with you two experiences about translation: one about being translated and the other one about being a translator.

It is a fact that translation complicates the authorial position usurping it and dislocating it. For me, the book, the end result once translated into another language, belongs to the translator. As a poet whose work is being translated, one can only intervene when one feels their original intention is not being respected. Surprisingly, the translator will often opt for an unexpected linguistic turn of phrase, or for a word that is part of a determined idiolect. They will have their reasons, and a poet must trust their translator. I recall a short essay by Anne Carson, "Variations on the Right to Remain Silent," in which she says "Every translator knows the point where one language cannot be translated into another." For Carson, this proves that "languages are not sciences of one another, you cannot match them item for

.....
International Writing Program Panel Discussion Series (Fridays 12-1 pm)

Iowa City Public Library

10/4/2024 – In and out of Translation

Felipe Franco Munhoz (Brazil), Zakariya Amataya (Thailand), Yassin Adnan (Morocco),
Nurit Kasztelan (Argentina)

item.” Once we can rule out that the intention behind translating a poem is its communicability, once we can agree in advance that the poem will never be the same as the original, this is when sonority can take on more significance than meaning, or vice versa.

Perhaps it is only by translating from one language to another that untranslatable expressions appear, and this reveals the specificity of poetic language. As the poet Circe Maia says, “the word ‘translation’ itself is misleading, by assuming the notion of transferring something from one side to another, for example the poem itself, from one language to another, and naturally this doesn’t make any sense.” Ultimately, the key is not understanding that some things will not be transferred, but rather accepting that, in the end, nothing is actually transferred.

In my case, being translated gave me the chance to realize the importance of the image in the poems I write. In the poem, “Love Might Arrive, Later,” I was faced with a question by Maureen, my translator, about whether “sueño interrumpido” referred to a couple whose future project together was ending. I did have that in mind, but what was really more important to me was the physical image of disrupted sleep in the poem, not the intangible idea. I wanted to show the image of a couple in bed together, and her waking up several times throughout the night because she can’t sleep. This meaning of “sueño” is something concrete, like the English word “sleep” as opposed to the other meaning, “dream.” I decided it was more important for the reader to visualize the image of someone tossing and turning during the night, and if that meant losing the idea that the couple’s project was ending, I was okay with giving that up.

Carson said, “There is something maddeningly attractive about the untranslatable.” Personally, translating and thinking about translation problems remind me of solving mathematical equations. I am reminded of when Hölderlin called translation “a salutary gymnastics of the mind.” I think translation is one of the most immersive works to which the self is committed. Thinking back to our collaboration, we drove ourselves nuts looking for a “solution” to the English word “crave.” “Crave” is one of those English words that doesn’t have such a straightforward translation, like “saudade” in Portuguese. For me, words like these have a physical connotation.

Translating also means embracing the fact that one is going to lose. In addition to the transmissible, all languages possess something impossible to transmit, something that bobs around in your head with no resolution in sight. “The translator must first focus on creating a similar effect in our

.....
International Writing Program Panel Discussion Series (Fridays 12-1 pm)

Iowa City Public Library

10/4/2024 – In and out of Translation

Felipe Franco Munhoz (Brazil), Zakariya Amataya (Thailand), Yassin Adnan (Morocco),
Nurit Kasztelan (Argentina)

language, taking great care to maintain the architecture of the stanzas, despite the extreme complexity of the images,” says Circe Maia. But translating also means trusting in language, trusting that the translation will help us to open up our senses. In the poem “All Leakage is an Illusion” we tried to find the right translation for “fuga,” so that in addition to an electrical leakage, it would also reference the idea of escape that comes from nominalizing the verb *fugarse*, to escape. We were both highly aware that these double meanings (or lack thereof) are always lurking about. In English there is no single word that can suggest both meanings at the same time, there is no way to allude to this semantic ambiguity. We finally accepted this defeat: in English we could not find the ambiguity that this verb has in Spanish, and we decided to respect image rather than idea, that is, only the electrical sense of the word *fuga* remains, not the idea of escape. Again, image in my poems takes on more importance over the ideas.

When one translates, the mind enters into a different state in which the common impressions of reality become deformed. Translating, like dancing, enables one to purely inhabit the moment, a here and now in which only exist the original poem and the poem that will become the end result.

The first time I decided to translate a living author was when I heard Asiya Wadud in a rooftop Poetry Reading in Brooklyn. There were four poets, but when she read, something happened to me; I was drowned by the musicality of her words. Maybe it was one of those times when poetry hits you in the gut, and within a minute I felt like I wanted to translate her. Later, I sent her a few versions. I use the word versions on purpose, because I think it is impossible to put an end to a translation. Translating is also making decisions all the time: if we want to save one thing, we lose another. Following not so much what the poem says but what the poem does with language. I chose a series of poems from a book called *Crosslight for a Youngbird*. It was quite difficult to do, as there are neologisms, phrases in other languages, and references that I didn’t know about at all. For example, “newbird” refers to a girl, Nana, from a Syrian documentary that I didn’t have access to. But at the same time, it also refers to a young and innocent bird. Her poetry is full of ambiguities that enrich the text but make it difficult to translate. There is a very strong political undertone in the poems, like an urgency, which comes through in the language used. It is as if the language were broken, because plain language would not be enough to explore the edge, the border, the crisis of political refugees and the problems of migration. The use of repetition in the poem is a kind of insistence, of repeating names as if not to forget them. As if the anaphora of the voices were inscribed in the lineage of poems of denunciation. Throughout the book, ekphrases appear interspersed

.....
International Writing Program Panel Discussion Series (Fridays 12-1 pm)

Iowa City Public Library

10/4/2024 – In and out of Translation

Felipe Franco Munhoz (Brazil), Zakariya Amataya (Thailand), Yassin Adnan (Morocco),
Nurit Kasztelan (Argentina)

with questions about language, about the mother tongue, about the language we carry with us and the one we speak socially. In translation, the fact that the poems are governed by the principle of rhythm is somewhat lost. But, even if we fail, even if the language would never be the same, it's worthy.

Perhaps the ultimate example of how translating is impossible could be illustrated by London-based poet Caroline Bergvall's experimental performance poem *Via*, which includes forty-eight versions of the translation of the first three lines of "Inferno," from Dante's *The Divine Comedy*; none is exactly the same as any other. Translation could be an infinite exercise. Having access to a living author when we are translating is perhaps the only thing to help us reduce the endless possibilities.

.....
International Writing Program Panel Discussion Series (Fridays 12-1 pm)
Iowa City Public Library

10/4/2024 – In and out of Translation

Felipe Franco Munhoz (Brazil), Zakariya Amataya (Thailand), Yassin Adnan (Morocco),
Nurit Kasztelan (Argentina)