

Between Magic and Compromise

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In many languages the term TRANSLATION has to do with the mouth. The word “language” in Hebrew is SAPHA, which means – Lip. Another Hebrew word for language is LASHON, which means Tongue, a word also used in English. But SAPHA, which is more commonly used, also means a rim or a border, an edge – like a riverbank or the curb of a sidewalk. It means “verge” and carries the echoes of being on the verge of something. This works beautifully within the context of language since language is a way to communicate and a border. I am not referring to these wise but seriously worn sayings about how language really separates rather than connects, but quite simply: there are so many languages around. When I look at this room, it is clear that if I chose not to speak English, I’d be talking to myself. If all of us did not use English (which serves, in this metaphor, I guess, as the voice of God) we would be as cut off and separated from each other as in the story of The Tower of Babel. Lip, SAPHA, is also the edge of the mouth – where it “ends” – but lips can open and utter words; lips can touch another’s [lips] and kiss. So, again, it works – being both a rim or border and an instrument for communication. Hebrew is a lot like that. The words have layers and layers of meaning and echoes that come from different uses and different, sometimes ancient, times. If you are a writer, you can really make them work for you – work overtime.

Translation is something between magic and compromise. Abject compromise –because to translate is to be faithful to two lovers: Beauty and Truth. It isn’t simple to do even when you write, let alone translate. Usually, you will find that being utterly true to one of them would mean betraying the other. What you need is to sort of dance with both of them. And if you also intend to write something of your own, you better stop dancing and be home at midnight. But no translation is ever exact or faithful because it is based on impossibility.

The matter of literature is language. A story or a poem is made of words just as a painting is made of colors of paint. When attempting to translate a poem, you change every word, every sentence. But are words from two different languages REALLY interchangeable? Is it so different from asking if one artist’s brush strokes are interchangeable with another’s? After all a work of art is not about “transferring” information. It is much more about the “how” than about the “what”. If the important thing is to know *what* Van Gogh drew, then wouldn’t it be just as rewarding to look at any other picture of his subject done by anyone: Aha, a chair! WICKER! Doesn’t look all that comfortable to sit on. I wouldn’t last two hours if I were to use it as my desk chair.

Translating a story or a poem is not the transference of information. Maybe in the translation of articles you could get away with that. I am not sure. But what you translate in a literary piece is, again, not only the “what” but the “how”. Indeed, it is not “information” in the first place that made the original into a living, glowing work of art: neither is it the subject matter or the themes that make it outstanding or important or even great. If it were the story and not the way that it is written, Nabokov’s *Lolita* would not be one of my most loved novels. What makes a poem is something else, something more; it is rather what Walter Benjamin calls “the unfathomable, the mysterious, the ‘poetic,’ something that a translator can reproduce only if he is also a poet.” And a guy from the neighborhood, Mark Twain, said: “*The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and a lightning bug.*”

After translating poetry for twelve years, I now believe that translating a poem is writing a new poem in the language you’re translating into. It is also writing a poem that is not your own. Pretty weird occupation.

I started to translate in order to get closer – come as close as I can, really – to texts that I like. Not with the intention of producing a translation; in fact, for years, when I was still writing mainly fiction, I steered clear of any offer to translate, being afraid that it would interfere with my own writing or at least influence it in ways I did not choose or control. And I still do not take on translations of fiction: maybe because of the time it takes: I am afraid that after writing in another novelist’s voice for ten months, I will find myself speaking in his voice also when I write my own. Heck! If I’d accepted the offer to translate Don DeLillo’s *Underworld*, I would be making passes at myself by now and maybe starting to go bald, which is even worse.

So my first translations were of poems that I really loved. Long ago I discovered that there was no better way to understand a poem than to translate it. This is the ultimate way to know it, and here my Hebrew-speaking brain goes *DING!! Attach biblical meaning please!* Well, sometimes, you want to read a poem only once and never call in the morning. Though, you do get closer to text and to poet. It does make you understand things that as a reader you wouldn’t have noticed. Translating makes the translator enter the poem and follow in the poet’s footprints while repeating his movements. When the poem is very good, it can be beautiful. You feel as if you’ve returned to the scene-of-the-poem. Reenacted the lovely crime of writing. Then I started to publish some translations, and slowly, it became not something I do in order to “read” better, but an undertaking and a passion.

But there is another reason why I want to translate more poets into the Hebrew language. This reason has to do with the place I come from and with the language that I translate into. Israel turned sixty-years-old this past May. Its language, Hebrew, is also on the one hand ancient and on the

other hand very young: Modern Hebrew is not much older than the country. Hebrew, of course, is an ancient language. God dictated the commandments to Moses in Hebrew – only the accent was probably different. And the volume is said to have been extremely high. But for 1,600 years, Hebrew was considered a dead language. From the time of the great exile by the Romans until the mid-19th century, it was not a spoken language – most Jews all over the globe spoke Yiddish, Ladino, Russian, German, and French – the language of the country they lived in. Hebrew was used for studying the Torah and over time became a “holy language” until a strange, eccentric man came in **1881** and started the resuscitation.

Like all meaningful historic events, the revival of Hebrew was a deep process that evolved slowly and came after a subtle germination. It cannot be credited to one factor or one person. But sometimes, there is a man who instigates such a process, sets it in motion and leads it forward. Such a man was Eliezer Ben-Yehuda who is known today as the father of the Modern Hebrew language. Eliezer Ben-Yehuda was quite a character. There are many stories about him that captured my imagination as a child. He was a fanatic that allowed only Hebrew in the house while almost no one else used it. It must have been hard on his children to communicate in this half-archaic and half-invented tongue that no other children spoke. Crossing the school yard must have felt like crossing a stream on STEPPING STONES – here there is a word and there – none; here a bunch of words close together and then – nothing: a gap you have to jump over. Strangely enough a few more families joined in, and slowly, it grew.

Today, Hebrew is a vivid, beautiful language. The literary scene is rich, and even though today's children read less than their parents, like everywhere in the world, we still are called the “people of the book”. There is a truly amazing amount of the world's poetry and literature that has been “brought” into the language, so to speak, which is the way I got to know almost all of the writers and poets that I love most. They didn't necessarily write in Hebrew. Until about a century ago, almost nobody did – not even the Jewish writers. But there are so many great writers that haven't been translated yet. And it does give an Israeli writer or poet a strong motivation – even desire – to translate: In the field of literature, you can still feel a little bit like a pioneer.