

Sölvi Björn Sigurðsson

Jet-Lagged Ramblings and Damaged Psyches

On my way down here – and I say down because it was the latter half of my journey to the States and the plane was descending – I was reading *The Brothers Karamazov* in an Icelandic translation and was both happy and surprised to find how immediately it spoke to me. It was almost like I knew the man who had written the novel more than a hundred years earlier, in a language of which I have absolutely no comprehension. And I must say that it was comforting to feel that there had been just as many idiots, scoundrels and dreamers in 19th century Russia as in modern Iceland. To experience this relative timelessness, translated through more than a century of crazy events, as well as through a whole different alphabet, must be a good experience for anyone who works with literature. I was laughing so much that the people in the plane around me thought I had some strange disease and had been given laughing gas to calm me on the journey. I told Madame Vodrie – a Polonaise woman from the 16th arrondissement of Paris, sitting next to me – that I was just reading a funny novel. This prompted such a laborious answer from Madame Vodrie’s part that for almost half an hour I was listening to a crazy story about broken loves and rare types of Asian mud that make spiders allergic to their own stinging. I think it’s best that I do not go into further details about her story at this point. I am not vulgar in the brute sense of the word, but still I must admit that I was waiting with some anxiety for a good opportunity to tell Madame Vodrie that I was entering a marvelous writing program in the Midwest. Yes, I was going to be in this University, writing, and getting to know glorious and brilliant people who were writers – like me! – and I told her I was also a translator.

“So what do you translate?” Madame Vodrie asked and offered me a bottle of Sprite. “Have you perhaps translated Dostoyevsky? I know that your country is small and there can’t be many people interested in old foreign literature, not enough, at least, for many translators.”

I told her, still, that there were quite a few translators and some of them were very good, like the woman who translated Dostoyevsky and made me laugh so much that she herself, Madame Vodrie, believed I had been induced with laughing gas. Then I told her I had started my writing career as a translator of romantic poetry by Keats and Byron. From there on I moved to Rimbaud, the French rebel, and that now I was translating *The Tempest* by Shakespeare for the Reykjavik City Theater. Keats, Rimbaud, Shakespeare and me – ha-ha! - top that!

“I see. Congratulations. Yes, ha-ha, I can see you’re having fun. But still I have to wonder: Aren’t you getting just a bit ahead of yourself? Shakespeare into Icelandic? It can’t have so much relevance. Shakespeare into English was very relevant in its day, I’m sure, and perhaps even more so today, and the same can probably be said about Dostoyevsky into Russian. I am talking, of course, about this great transportation of his soul and intellect into the written word. But generally speaking, isn’t the translator just a medium for already composed things?”

I liked Madame Vodrie a lot but was surprised by her lack of genuine awe for me – given all the great literature I was translating. I felt I had to explain to her that, yes, I might well be fooling myself, but that if my translation work was just dead weight to the world and no more important than, say, Yahoo Babel-Fish – which at least had some practical value – well, then it was better for me at least to live with this delusion. Because for me it was important to translate good books. By translating

Keats, for instance, I felt as if I was keeping Keats alive – almost like a super-doctor of 18th century tuberculosis. As such I could even fool myself into a further belief that I had become this tiny part of Keats' work. Which isn't too bad for a guy who spends his time on English football and *House* episodes. By sitting down with Keats' sonnets and twisting their fashion into Icelandic poems – it's like building a bridge into another culture and conglomerating worlds from the past and the now, melting all the world's distances into your own home, into your mother tongue and those of your countrymen. Hopefully this has some value, I said to Madame Vodrie.

"Good for you," she replied. "At least you aren't ashamed of what you do. We are all becoming so globalized, so it's probably good that someone finds time to do silly things like that. I am a business woman myself and could never find time to do such things. For me, Shakespeare into Icelandic is just like Tandoori Chicken in Prague. The whole world is a translation of the past and it's all mixed up. My job is to interpret the past for fast gain in the future. Perhaps you should stop translating, dear friend, and become an interpreter like me. An Interpreter of the Past is the Baker of the Future."

"We writers tend to hope that this is what being a writer is all about," I said. "To interpret air into a cake. Listening to flour and perhaps some vanilla drops. That's writing. To hear a melody in the scratching of a baker's ass – that's true romance with art and the ever surrounding flow of the world's meaning."

"A writer, yes, I can hear you make recipes from scratch," Madame Vodrie said.

"It's harder though," I said. "To write, I mean. Even though you can fool around as much as you want you have to buy ink cartridges, and perhaps do traveling, and during those operations you have to find time to write. And finding time to write and to be original within that moment of jet lag, baby cry, dirt coffee and lack of good hygienic materials – it's not so easy. I get tired. I want to watch a movie. I get so lazy that I put it in the watching-machine. Or perhaps I translate. Let my girlfriend do the watching-up. Translating, on the other hand, brings me immediately within the moment because the doubt has been removed. The primal composition has already been edited. All I have to do is pour some coffee into myself and breathe calmly. Like going to the park. Like living as a normal person, almost."

"I think you are not lying to me," Madame Vodrie said. "To tell you the truth, I have always thought about art and original thinking as something tightly bound to the things we know, so perhaps it's not bad for you to work with things that other writers have done."

"It's good to hear you say that," I said. "In fact I once wrote a novel about this guy who rents the subconsciousness of another writer, a Japanese one, and goes 50/50 through his past as real past, and 50/50 through his past as manipulated past within this writer's subconsciousness. The Japanese writer had influenced the storyteller a lot in the years the real story takes place. The storyteller has a girlfriend who loves this Japanese writer. She is a big fan of his work. She's never met him of course. But then she disappears. And the protagonist can't find her. His life becomes a waste and all there is to do for the rest of his life is rebuild the past, repeating the same words that were shouted into his soul when he first loved and lost. And they will never go from there, those words, they are his whole existence. The true meaning of the story is not his acquaintance with post-modern literary theories, though, like those from Roland Barthes or Julia Kristeva. "All text is a mosaic of quotations," et cetera. It's much more like an idea of the Past as Lord of the Now – and that perhaps, as you say, we can never be original without the past and the things that other people taught us.

Iowa City Public Library and the International Writing Program Panel Series, September 3, 2010:

Milosz Biedrzycki (Poland), Andrea Hirata (Indonesia),

Beverly Perez Rego (Venezuela) and Solvi Bjorn Sigurosson (Iceland)

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That's the subtext, I suppose. The upper text – the guy lives in an attic, by the way – is about this young writer who is trying to write his first novel, so – well I'm mixing you up. It's probably the jet lag, sorry."

"Don't be so serious. Just throw away the Sprite and have some of my Kruger. I want to hear more. You have obviously been influenced by other people's literature in your career as a writer. Are there other books such as this one? Where you mix the work of other writers into your own? Are you perhaps on total repeat in your writing?"

"Not always, but pretty much, yea. I get intoxicated with good text and want to do just that. It's *What Most Writers Think About Text But Are Afraid To Tell*. So I am being very honest with you, Madame Vodrie, and you can't tell anyone. If regular people who go to work and then head straight back home to read something that I wrote – well, if they knew that it was not just something I scratched off my chin during my last facial – but rather something that came from being induced with the work of other writers and this big tradition of playing with words – yes, they might start to think that all they had to do themselves was quit their jobs, read a few more books and then run their own copy/paste machines through their damaged psyches. And we don't want that to happen. A lot of people have damaged psyches. And a lot of people are so much smarter than me. I'd be out of my job in no time."

"Before we land, dear friend, tell me what your other books are about. You started something but then your mind drifted."

"The first book I was happy with is called *The Diabolical Comedy*. It's about a young drunk who meets Dante in downtown Reykjavik, the capital of Iceland, and goes with him to the nine good old bars of hell in his hometown. It was written in Dante's syntax, the *terzina*, and makes a lot of fun of modern politicians and pop stars, but mostly it mocks the protagonist himself. It's not a translation of sorts, but still it's a translation. A translation of the past, as you say."

"That's good for you. But now you must excuse me, I have to go powder my nose."

Shortly after this we landed in Minneapolis. I took another plane from there to Cedar Rapids and met a football hero who was into knitting and magic. But that's another story. Thanks. And goodbye.