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The Transwriter as *Passeur*

Traduttore, traditore is one of those elegant phrases we learned as language majors without the background of the political and aesthetic battles to which the expression alluded. Renaissance Europe and the fight for cultural supremacy and aesthetic absolutes were worlds away. “Translator, traitor” was a pedagogical taunt meaning that we, as students, would never get it right, that we would never approach the original work with optimum beauty and accuracy. There was nothing like the original. The masterpiece. The primordial word of a creator.

But there was nothing earth-shaking here; a question of academic work, merely. I have always experienced a perverse enjoyment of the challenge. I flow when impossibility becomes a neat and meaningful page. I am a translator at heart.

I became a translator in deed, in the realm of academic life as a high school student, a university graduate, a university post-graduate. Before my BA was in my pocket I had changed linguistic life-worlds, and translation became my daily life. And sometimes, the butter on my daily bread, if not my bread and butter.

I had myself been translated. I had switched worlds. Jamaica for France. Jamaican dialect and English for French. No, it was no switch, but an accretion. After French, Hausa in Niger; and later some Zarma. New possibilities. Short-circuits. Bridges. In Versailles in 1985, I conversed with a Mozambican student: he in Portuguese, I in Spanish, and he took a picture of me perched on Marie-Antoinette’s armchair, which was forbidden. We did not know this. And so we flirted with the forbidden, the unintended, the necessary crossing of word bridges to reside in the in-between.

I was destined for all of this. Starting with my name, my island origin. Diglossia and, later, glossolalia; my tongue grew flexible, brave, a mixer.

To fast-forward to the exhilarating present, I can say that I have translated thousands of pages: a great deal of academic work by others, a bit of my own; a bit of literature, oral and written, and in my most recent past, my own creative writing.

To focus on the translation of literature alone, what have these experiences taught me about the process?

- Translation is not simply about words;
- Translation is creation in another language;
- Self-translation is horrendous and impossible;
- The translator is a transwriter and *passeur*.

I shall conflate these points below.

Translation is not simply about words. Every translator, practiced or potential, will tell you this: as soon as you have a mastery of two languages, many people will think that you can translate from one to another, as a matter of course. This is not the case. Translation is not natural. It is learnt. So, it is not

enough to have the words lining up, reading for use, like sprightly dancers posed for a quadrille. You have the words, then you do battle, with the words, with the meaning, with the worlds, with yourself. Sometimes with another person, over all of this. And so my mentor and friend, Fatimata Mounkaila and I fought for hours about the translation of a *zamu* from Zarma into French. There was a French translation, but we both thought that it could be improved. I was to translate the poem into English, but the French translation was problematic. The words were all French, but the translation made little sense in places. It was the music, she said. We couldn't sacrifice the music. I understood the point, but pointed out how pointless it was to have music and no meaning. And so we fought, and I translated my way.

This and other experiences have impressed upon me the idea that *translation is creation in the direction of another language audience, in another language*. The idea that the *translator is a transwriter and a passeur*, a term I have not yet encountered in my reading. Transwriter is not just word play; it is a résumé of living and writing between worlds. In the francophone world in which I have lived for thirty-two years, *passeur* refers to the go-between paid by a desire-full and adventurous alien to take him over into a bright new world. Not a mercenary, necessarily, but a doer of the impossible, whose work deserves not only symbolic but also financial reward.