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Lost and Found in Translation

Translation seems to be an excellent metaphor for consciousness. From time immemorial, when we have been trying to understand and be understood, we have been trying to translate.

Since different languages offer different possibilities, something always has to be lost in the process of translation—and sometimes, something can also be found. It even happens that, when being translated, the author discovers something within his or her text of which he or she was not aware before. For example, witnessing my poetry translated into a ballet by a Canadian choreographer, into music by a Dutch composer, and into a play by a Thai theatre group, was quite an amazing experience, reaching beyond not only the borders of language, but also of cultural expression.

I truly believe that translating has an element of alchemy in it; it is complete transformation—or, as the alchemists say, transmutation. And it is not only the text that is transformed. Within the process something changes also in the translator. For translating is first and foremost a deep experience of understanding; therefore it has a strong transformative influence on the one who takes on the responsibility of translation.

Needless to say, I am not speaking here about technical translation, or interpretation. The example of this, as the story goes, is that when testing the first translation machine, a sentence from the Bible: “The spirit is ready, but the flesh is weak,” was given for translation from English into Russian, and back again. The final sentence received was: “Vodka is good, but meat is rotten.” And sadly enough, translations like this occur very often. Sometimes they can even create a rather comical effect, as when “Bye-bye, baby, goodbye” is understood as “Buy, buy the infant, that’s a great purchase!” However, there are much more subtle, yet no less sad misinterpretations.

Like our fingerprints, our personal languages within any language, or idiolects, are unique. They contain vocabularies, intonations, rhythms and silences. In order to translate a literary text—particularly poetry—one must commit oneself quite like an actor does. One must let go of all habits and one’s ego. One has to enter the imaginary state of the mind of the author, to experience the urge to create this particular text as painfully and passionately as the author did—only then can he or she start with what is called translating.

Translation is never about the words. It is not even about choosing between meaning and music, sacrificing one for the other. Translation is a creation, recreating something that has the same effect as the original. Mathematically, if *A* is the original text, and *X* is the language in which it is written, *B* the translation, and *Y* the language into which it is translated, then *B*’s relation to *Y* has to equal *A*’s relation to *X*. That is, the translation’s relation to the language into which it has been translated has to equal the original text’s relation to its original language. Naturally, in order to achieve this, one has to thoroughly understand not only the language, but the cultural context.

What is a very simple everyday phrase in one language may become grandiose or awkward, incorrectly symbolic or senseless, in the other language. For example, “sitting

in the sun,” in Estonian, is literally “sitting in the hand of the Sun;” “visiting someone” is going “into his or her root.” In poetry one can use everyday meaning blended with the metaphorical—but this double meaning is always puzzling for a translator, just as the use of various homonyms as puns is.

However, the more challenging the process of translating poetry from one language to another is the more fascinating it is as well. It also takes a lot of empathy. One always has to consider which words the author would have chosen if he or she had the translator’s mother tongue as his or her tool.

Sometimes, however, it is possible to achieve a good translation even if the translator does not know the original language. But then it takes two—the translator and an interpreter or transliterator—and good cooperation. If the author and translator share at least one common language it is possible to work together. Listening to how the author speaks, his or her tone of voice when reading, his or her explanations of the text, can give a very valuable insight into his or her poetry.

Not always is the translator lucky enough to meet the author, so he or she has to rely on the written word, guessing all the time and discussing—even if only in his or her mind—the matter with various scholars who have done this before the translator or have shared common experiences and difficulties. I remember when I translated Shakespeare I could not help talking in his meter for months. At first people were puzzled, but then they got used to it and sometimes even replied in the same way. It was only when my body had adjusted itself to Shakespeare’s rhythm that I could talk and write naturally in it, and that puns came to my mind without thinking. This is what I call transformation—the same happens to actors. The character they have created continues to live on in their bodies. Like languages we have once learned and then forgotten, we may, all of a sudden, have flashes of remembering and understanding. For a time, even if only in our imagination, we have lived in the skin of the other writer and we will never be who we were before this experience.

I am not a professional translator; I am a passionate one. And I really believe that such people—in Estonian we have a beautiful word for them, “lovers of the thing”—should only translate texts that are absolutely necessary for them to translate; that the particular text exists in his or her mother tongue must be of vital importance. Only then is transformation possible—or maybe only then should translation of a literary text be allowed at all.