

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Writing and translating

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I have never satisfactorily worked out exactly when there began to be an hegemonic distinction made between writing and translating. All I know is that such a distinction exists and seems to have been in operation for some time now, which has led to translation being seen as the poor relation of writing, often referred to as 'original' or 'creative' writing, and widely perceived as superior. Some writers are lionized and critics write endlessly about their achievements, but no matter how productive they may be, translators are generally ignored, they are invisible beings whose literary skills are obliterated by the reputation of the writer whose work they translate. So pervasive is the hierarchical division between writing and translating that in the academic world scholars are discouraged from listing their translations as serious publications, and an article in an obscure theoretical journal can be ranked as superior to a translation of a work by Pushkin or Dante.

Yet in the Middle Ages, that distinction did not exist, so we find writers like Chaucer engaging in a variety of literary activities that included original composition, translation, rewriting, pseudotranslation and imitation without there being an apparent hierarchy of textual practice. Similarly, in the sixteenth century we find translation accorded high status, though by the time John Dryden was writing and translating at the end of the seventeenth century, distinctions between the two categories of writing were definitely being made, to the detriment of translators.

Part of the answer must surely lie in the invention of printing, in the complexities of copyright laws that accompanied the spread of print, and in the fascination of the post-Renaissance world with the idea of the mighty Original, the text that rose like a colossus towering over all derivatives. Perhaps another part of the answer also lies in the steady increase in the number of people being formally educated, for translation has been frequently used in the classroom as a means of teaching children about language. This instrumentalist usage of translation, seen as a means to a pedagogic end may also have played a role in creating the idea of translation as somehow less creative than other forms of writing, less original and, in an age that sets high value upon originality, consequently less important.

Translators themselves contribute to that value system, for translators are often self-consciously more private than people who define themselves as writers, seeing their role as more functional than creative. Yet it is absurd to see translation as anything other than a creative literary activity, for translators are all the time engaging with texts first as readers and then as rewriters, as recreators of that text in another language. Indeed, given the constraint of having to work within the parameters of that source text, it could be argued that translation requires an extraordinary set of literary skills, no whit inferior to the skills required to produce that text in the first instance.

What is often forgotten is that many writers also translate, and for those who do both, the hierarchical distinction that prevails in what might loosely be termed popular mythology simply does not exist. Translation, like imitation, can be a means of learning the craft of writing, for if writers can recognize and learn to speak in different voices it becomes more probable that they will identify a distinctive voice of their own. Yet translation can also serve a purpose far beyond that of learning the basics of writing. Through a writer's life, translation may be one of several different literary activities undertaken by the same person. Pope, for example, is probably as well remembered for his translation of Homer as he is for *The Dunciad*. Most of the great eighteenth-century poets, the European Romantics, the monolithic nineteenth-century writers, the fin-de-siècle writers, the modernists and the poets of the 1930s all translated and read other people's translations. Literary revivals across Europe in the nineteenth century were underpinned by translation. As the world shrank conceptually with increased trade, greater ease of travel and better communications generally, so translation helped to bring awareness of the variety of cultures that existed and had existed from around the planet. Translation was a means not only of acquiring more information about other writers and their work, but also of discovering new ways of writing.

Perhaps the best example of a writer's inspiration through translation is Keats's sonnet, 'On first looking into Chapman's Homer'. The sonnet begins with the famous line: 'Much have I travelled in the realms of gold . . .'. Those travels, we learn as the sonnet progresses, are journeys of the mind, made possible through translation. The poet claims to have travelled round what Byron referred to as the isles of Greece, the many western islands depicted by bards in the service of the God of poetry, Apollo. Then comes his great moment of discovery, an instant of revelation that he compares to an astronomer discovering a new planet or to Cortez, 'when with eagle eyes/he stared at the Pacific'. The poet has discovered Chapman's translation of Homer, and for the first time he feels in direct contact with ancient Greece, with what he calls 'its pure serene'. The power and magnificence of Homer has come to life for him through the work of a long-dead Renaissance translator.

The words Keats uses to describe that moment of revelation are significant. Until he 'heard Chapman speak out loud and bold', he says, 'Yet did I

never breathe its pure serene'. Homer has become embodied in the English poet, who can now 'breathe' the serenity and purity of a writer from another age. The significance of this account of what is on one level a reading experience lies in the language Keats uses to describe what he feels. Homer's writing, through Chapman's translation, has acquired a life so powerful that it has become incorporated into his very being, so that he breathes Homer in early-nineteenth-century England.

Keats translated very little, but then he died very young. What he left for posterity are works that were only made possible through translation, and this he acknowledges, though nowhere better than in his sonnet on Chapman's Homer. One of the difficulties we have today in assessing the work of countless writers is that uncomfortable distinction between writing and translating, which starts to break down once it is scrutinized closely. Ted Hughes may be popularly remembered as the late Poet Laureate, but he also left behind a huge body of translations, and his *Tales from Ovid* entered the bestseller lists when they first appeared in 1997. For Hughes, as for so many poets, writing and translating were not antipathetic but rather offered different possibilities at different points in his literary career. This is a crucial point that is often missed: frequently writers translate other people's works because those are the works they would have written themselves had they not already have been created by someone else. Translation is not just an exercise in such cases, it is part of the continuum of a writer's life. Sometimes translating becomes more important than reworking an idea that has its origin in one's own language.

In his preface to another bestselling translation of the 1990s, his version of *Beowulf*, Seamus Heaney reflects on the process that led him, a Nobel Prize-winning Irish poet, to translate an Anglo-Saxon epic. Having studied the poem as an undergraduate and enjoyed it, Heaney responded positively to an invitation from *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* to produce a new translation. This was some time in the 1980s when he was teaching at Harvard, and Heaney notes that he felt then that translating would help him to keep his 'linguistic anchor' lodged on what he calls the Anglo-Saxon seafloor as a kind of 'aural antidote' to the American speech patterns with which he was coming to terms.

But despite the motivation, the poet ran into difficulties. He describes how he approached the task like a sixth-former doing his homework, setting himself twenty lines a day, trying to sort out the exact meaning of those lines and then 'hoping' that he could somehow turn them into decent poetry. The task proved increasingly hard: 'often, however, the whole attempt to turn it into modern English seemed to me like trying to bring down a megalith with a toy hammer' (Heaney 1999: xii). Not surprisingly, he abandoned the task.

What enabled him to start again was the excitement of philology, of tracing the complex journey of a single Anglo-Saxon word from the age of *Beowulf* to its variant use by a member of his own Ulster family. Finding lexical meanings for words had not been enough, what he needed and had

found unexpectedly was what he calls 'the tuning fork' that enables a writer to find the right pitch and note. The poem had to come alive for him, he had to find a language that was both suited to the antiquity and stature of the Anglo-Saxon epic and one in which he could feel rooted and write fluently and with excitement. His metaphor for that process is one that he borrows from another writer, one he read in translation:

To put it another way: from the point of view of the writer, words in a poem need what the Polish poet Anna Swir once called 'the equivalent of a biological right to life'.

When such an equivalent is not found, the translation flounders. In his essay 'Euripides and Professor Murray', T. S. Eliot wrote admiringly of the performance of Sybil Thorndyke as Medea at the Holborn Theatre, London, but castigated Murray's translation. It was inconceivable, Eliot complained that 'anyone with a genuine feeling for the sound of Greek verse should deliberately elect the William Morris couplet, the Swinburne lyric, as a just equivalent' (Eliot 1960: 75). Unable to find a voice of his own, Murray had opted for the archaic clumsiness of mediocre translators from previous decades. And here we can see the distinction between Heaney's idea of translation and Murray's: the former was primarily concerned with finding an equivalence in his own poetic life, finding a language with which he could be totally familiar and consequently think creatively, whereas Murray's intention was to make available to contemporary readers the work of great ancient writers. Murray's interest lay precisely in the mechanics of translating, motivated by a notion of faithfulness and driven also by his sense of the superiority of his source.

Heaney's account of the two periods in his life when he attempted a translation of *Beowulf* made me think more deeply about my own writing and translating. Ever since my undergraduate years I have written different kinds of text and I have also translated. These days, I probably produce more journalism than anything else, short pieces that are often polemical, sometimes with a comic tone, usually produced at speed and to tight deadlines. At other stages in my life, I have written academic books and articles, translated plays, poems, novels and stories, written my own stories and poems, experimented with a kind of autobiographical travel book, attempted a novel for children, finished a now hopelessly outdated novel in the *Fear of Flying* genre and collected boxfiles of notes for a massive book that will combine most of the above if it ever comes to be written. All that writing has been fitted in around an academic career and bringing up four children single-handedly.

Nevertheless, regardless of quality, there has been continuity. My first attempt at a play, written in a lined exercise book in pencil, was begun when I was 10 years old. I came across it when cleaning out a cupboard, and flinched with embarrassment at the awfulness of my writing. But there was one aspect of that dreadful play that struck me: the characters were

from various different countries and spoke in curious varieties of English and translationese. The multilingualism that has been both blessing and curse throughout my life was already surfacing in what I suppose was my earliest piece of creative writing. Writing about travel, comparing texts from different literatures, translating from Italian, Spanish, Latin and French, co-translating from Polish, struggling to produce texts for different kinds of readers, the constant over the years has been an awareness of cultural and linguistic difference and a desire to try to encapsulate difference in some way into my writing.

As an undergraduate, I was fascinated by Dante and by Virgil, and learned by heart long passages from both the *Divine Comedy* and the *Aeneid* in order to cope with the horrors of the unseen translation exams. The English translations I read all seemed defective in that they were so difficult to read, compared to the fluency of the works in their original languages. Dorothy Sayers' forced *terza rima* that bent Dante's syntax into extraordinary shapes was a *tour de force*, but was also pretty ugly. I found myself asking questions about the value of translations that seemed to remove the poetry from the poem, and wondering whether I could do any better. When I first tried translating poetry, however, it was neither from Italian nor from Latin, but from Anglo-Saxon, the great joy of my undergraduate years because it gave me a sense of the continuity of language and helped me to understand in principle what Heaney was so brilliantly able to put into practice: the imaginative vitality that transcends centuries through language. My translations were not very good, but making them taught me about the pleasure of translation as problem-solving and gave me much greater respect for translators of poetry in general.

My first dissertation was on James Joyce and Italo Svevo, and the interest in modernism excited by that research led me on to Luigi Pirandello. Over the years I have written three books on Pirandello and several articles, have translated a number of his plays for radio, the stage and the page and have also translated short stories and essays. That interest in Pirandello lasted for a good twenty years, then vanished completely. Pirandello, with his intellectual contortions reflected in his difficult sentence structures, his open-ended plots and his dark sense of black humour intrigued me for years, then suddenly ceased to be important. I have no idea how or why that happened, but after years of writing about the man and translating his work, in short really getting to know him, I fell out of love with him.

I had fallen in love with a completely different kind of writer, the Argentinian poet Alejandra Pizarnik. Like Pirandello, Pizarnik's vision of the world was bleakly comic, but whereas he wrote a series of enigmatically entitled works (*A Dream, but perhaps it isn't; As You Desire Me; Six Characters in Search of an Author; Either Somebody's or Nobody's; Finding Oneself*), Pizarnik wrote tiny sketch-poems, some only one or two lines long, powerfully imagistic, about death and pain and loss. She was also a woman writing about experiences of the body, whereas Pirandello was not only

male, but also intensely cerebral. After years of translating intellectual writers (Pirandello was by no means the only intellectual writer whose work I translated in my twenties and thirties), I discovered another writer, a very different writer, whose moods chimed with my own in some inexplicable way.

Translating Pizarnik was a completely different experience from translating Pirandello. Quite apart from the difference stylistically and in terms of content and genre, I found that I went about the process in a different way. When I translated Pirandello (indeed when I translate any extended work, whether play, novel, story, essay) my first stage is a crude handwritten draft that I often never refer to again. I see this as a necessary stage, a stage of 'writing the reading' in some palpable form. Writing mechanically for page after page fixes the reading of each individual sentence; it shows up the problem points, the deficiencies in my understanding and the places where more work is needed. By the end of a three-act play, for example, let alone a 300-page novel, I have a sheaf of illegible handwriting, but I also have a pretty good idea of how the text works. The next stage, which I see as translation proper, involves writing and rewriting, crafting sentences, using dictionaries, thesauruses and encyclopaedias. By the time I have finished a translation, I may have several drafts including the initial handwritten scrawl. Significantly, though, I never have more than one draft, or two exceptionally, when writing other types of text. I rewrite so many times in my head before sitting down at the computer that all I usually do is to make minor changes, certainly minor in comparison to the number of drafts involved in translation. There is therefore a clear working distinction for me between translating and other kinds of writing: translating involves consciously and deliberately working through several draft stages. There is a game element here, a playfulness that does not emerge in my other writing, where the game (if it can be termed that) happens internally before the practical writing stage begins.

Translating Pizarnik's poems, though, was not at all like translating other writers. I would translate several poems at a sitting, almost always at weekends, in snatched hours when the children were all busy and I could relax. Indeed, translating Pizarnik was a form of recreation. I did not make the series of drafts I make with other writers, and with hindsight, the process of translating her was much more akin to my writing practice than to what I identify as my translating practice. I felt I was somehow engaged in a kind of dialogue with her, that by translating I could understand my own thoughts better. One might almost say that translating Pizarnik *was* Bassnett writing – this, of course, despite the total difference in our cultures, religion, education and life experiences. She was the artistic daughter of East European Jewish immigrants, who died by her own hand at the age of 36, never married or divorced or had children, had no professional ambitions and expressed her existential despair through poems with interlinked images of emptiness, abandonment and desolation. Trying to articulate that connectedness through difference, I wrote :

Her fantasies were of blood and knives. Mine were of secret sexual encounters and having the strength to break through bars with my own hands. We shared our dreams of violence, just as we shared our sense of homelessness, of not-belonging. She found herself in Argentina, a Latin American with a lost Jewish European past. I found myself in England, an Englishwoman with a lost Mediterranean childhood, an insider yet an outsider simultaneously, standing on the threshold between cultures: the ideal place for a translator, who occupies the liminal space that others step over without a passing thought.

(Bassnett and Pizarnik 2002: 29)

There was something so compelling for me in her writing, that I translated dozens of poems, from pirate editions (no definitive edition had appeared), with no intention of publishing any of them. Only when I had a drawerful of translations did I venture to read some of them at literary events, to share them with friends and, encouraged, to publish a few.

Writing is a curious business. Some writers are amazingly productive, some have schedules to which they adhere ruthlessly (2,000 words before breakfast or similar routines), some write on computers, some on ancient typewriters, some by hand, some even dictate. Others write sporadically, with long periods of not writing. Such periods mean different things to different people: for some, the fallow periods are necessary times when subconscious revitalization and fertilization processes are taking place, for others these are times of despair, of writer's block when inspiration seems dead and unattainable. For me, the periods when I have not felt any strong impulse to produce my own poetry have been periods of extended reading, of different kinds of writing and, most obviously, of translation. I believe this has been the case over the centuries for many writers: translating serves as a way of continuing to write and to shape language creatively, it can act as a regenerative force. It has often been noted that periods of intense translation activity in a culture are followed by a great flowering of local writing talent – this is exactly what happened during the English Renaissance of the sixteenth century after the vast amount of translation undertaken during the difficult years of civil war in the fifteenth.

In 2002 I published a little book that was an attempt to understand more about the patterns of writing and translating, about the relationship that can develop between writer and translator, about ideas of influence and transmission through translation. I called it *Exchanging Lives*, and it was a collection in four parts: my translations of Pizarnik with the Spanish on facing pages, a sequence of my translations of selected poems with poems of my own arranged in a kind of dialogue, so that we each had poems about our dead fathers, for example, and a short sequence of my

poems entitled 'Asia of my Imaginings'. The fourth section consisted of Pizarnik's untranslatable epitaph poem:

Alejandra alejandra
debajo estoy yo
alejandra

and my counter-poem:

Susan susanna
lying below
susanna

in which the two names by which I am known in my different linguistic incarnations resonate with the dual meaning of the word 'lying', just as Pizarnik's use of *debajo* signals a plurality of meaning also. I felt that the best translation I could offer of Pizarnik's incredibly tightly structured tiny poem was to offer my own alternative.

Years before, when working on Joyce and Svevo, I had started out confidently to demonstrate the influence of Joyce on the Italian writer. Alas, the more I researched, the more I combined primary sources with textual analysis, the clearer it became that Joyce had been strongly influenced by Svevo rather than the other way round. Being a more confident (some might say arrogant) man than the self-effacing Triestine writer, Joyce of course denied that his relationship with Svevo had ever meant much at all. The Joyce-Svevo dissertation topic turned out to be Pirandellian in its multiple layers of complexity. What I learned from that was to distrust influence studies and to take with a handful rather than a pinch of salt any statements made by established writers about their sources of inspiration. Tracing influence is incredibly difficult, and though writers are undoubtably influenced by one another, readers also have a role to play. Writers and readers operate in a web of interconnections, and when more than one language is involved, the complexity of the networks becomes almost impossible to trace. Translators cannot possibly render the same networks because the frame of reference of the two sets of readers is bound to be different. All they can hope to do is to create an alternative web of inference.

Nevertheless, my writing was definitely influenced by Pizarnik in ways that I cannot properly explain. My poetry through the 1980s and early 1990s was heavily rhythmical, with strong metres, clear narrative voices and a lot of irony. Comments about that work stressed the 'dramatic' quality of the writing, and one critic wrote that I should try my hand at plays. Yet playwriting held no appeal whatsoever, though translating plays was challenging and enjoyable. Once I started on the Pizarnik translations, however, my own poetry dried up. I managed a couple of poems occasionally when asked to produce something for some journal or other, but they

weren't very good because I felt I was writing to a formula that had become too familiar.

Then one afternoon, stuck at Istanbul airport, I started to write poems, little image poems, poems that seemed to come out of the air. The poems had a narrative thread – a loveless marriage, the emptiness of Central Asia summoned up by the names of flight destinations, the colours of some of the beautiful artefacts I had grown accustomed to seeing in Turkish museums. This was a period when I was doing a lot of consultancy work in Turkey and also, memorably, in Uzbekistan. Two of the poems came out fully formed:

The flight to Tashkent is on time
 people push toward the exit
 impatient for Asia.
 I would like to be out there now
 frontierless
 laid on the belly of the world
 sand and snow folded in the curves of the earth
 grey winds stroking my heart.

From the several pages of little poems I wrote that afternoon and subsequently, almost unstopably for days, that poem and this next one seemed worth preserving:

The Great Khan drove his armies
 across the belly of Asia
 Europe in his desires
 power in his hands.
 Me, I am looking eastwards
 to the curved bowl
 where my poems lie hidden
 amber in the sands.

Over the next few weeks I wrote dozens of poems in what I call the Great Khan sequence. Then I realized that not only had I stopped translating Pizarnik, but also my whole style of writing had changed and I was writing not so much like her, but in a style that echoed hers. The particularity of that style lies in the use of images as referents, images that the reader has to work with and decode, since Pizarnik rarely spells out any logical message, even more rarely in sequential sentence form. My previous writing had used the sentence as the mainstay, and what I could see happening to my writing was a gradual loosening of the power of the sentence structure. That process was connected to my endeavours to translate poems like this:

un golpe del alba en las flores
 me abandona ebria de nada y de luz lila
 ebria de inmovilidad y de certeza

(dawn strikes in the flowers
 leaving me drunk with nothingness and lilac light
 drunk with stillness and with certainty)

When I started translating Pizarnik, I was a writer driven by a desire to write logically, clearly and accessibly. My academic writing can be said to be a form of translation too, since I have set out to 'translate' complex ideas and theories into terms that students and educated general readers can understand. Surrealism had no place in my personal lexicon. Yet after Pizarnik, it did.

I have not translated any more Pizarnik since I finished the manuscript of *Exchanging Lives*. Response to the book was mixed: some reviewers liked the idea of two writers engaged in some kind of dialogue through translation, one or two complained about 'inaccuracies' in the translations. For here it is important to confess that at no stage did I ever seek to translate Pizarnik's poetry as a linguistic exercise. Accuracy was irrelevant. I translated, week after week, poem after poem, for pleasure, and sometimes I would adjust the meaning of a word or a line to obtain a particular effect. The last line of Pizarnik's poem to her father:

lleno de oquedades movedizas como las palabras que escribo.

became in my version:

filled with uneasy hollows like these words I write.

The word 'uneasy', so much a part of my personal poetic lexicon, seemed ideally suited to Pizarnik's verse in this context. The line between translator and writer had become blurred somehow.

Over the last two years I have written almost no poetry and translated nothing. I have written a lot of short articles, pieces of journalism, think pieces about intercultural relations and about translation. My love affair with Pizarnik is over too. But I notice that I have been reading a huge variety of texts, from all over the place, perhaps most significantly poetry and prose from China, Japan and Korea and a great deal of European mystical poetry. There is no reason for me to read this type of text, since I am neither researching nor teaching in these areas, but once you reach a certain age, you begin to take note of patterns, whether of reading or of writing, and, if something starts to seem significant, then so be it. I think I am waiting to fall in love again, waiting for the moment that Neruda describes so marvellously, when he tells us that he was at the age when poetry 'arrived'. When that happens, I suppose I will start to translate again.