

# A Translator's Tale

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LAST YEAR I served as a judge for the *Independent* / Arts Council of England Foreign Fiction Prize. Half the prize goes to the translator, so we were under some obligation to view each submission as two books pressed into one—and to look for the telltale seams. My fellow judges were meticulous readers, alert to shifts in tone, infelicities of voice, and inconsistencies. But we could do little more than skim the surface, for we had no way of knowing how the original texts had come into being, and we could only guess what might have been going on in a translator's mind as she searched for the words to describe a fictive underworld of someone else's making.

I had only just emerged from such a quest and was still puzzling to make sense of it. So there may have been a selfish element in my desire to hear more from the fellow travelers whose works I was now presuming to judge. If I regretted their reserve, it was because I knew my accounts of my own journeys to have been similarly reticent. A case in point is the talk I gave at the 2006 Puterbaugh Conference on World Literature. I began (as all good dissemblers learn to do) on a personal note—describing how I had been a great admirer of Pamuk's work since first happening onto the English translation of *The White Castle* in the book room of the *Independent on Sunday* in the fall of 1990, and noticing, with some surprise, that it was written by a boy I'd known as a teenager. I went on to recall that, when I had first sat down to read *Snow* in Turkish four years ago and the dense and complex prose got the better of me, I would remind myself that I was "just reading for pleasure" and so did not need to understand every sentence perfectly. I recalled my fear and consternation when it was suggested to me that I might try my hand at translating this very book. I went on to say that when I agreed to give it a try, I had as clear an idea of what I wanted to achieve as I did when starting a novel of my own. That was not as boastful as it may have sounded. What I meant was that I knew where I wanted to go but had only the vaguest thoughts on how to get there.

Three years and three translations later, I could see that my travels had followed a certain pattern and that my endpoints—my translated texts—mapped the journey. But (as I went on to say in Oklahoma) you cannot read the map without first knowing the scale. To understand a translation, you must measure not just the distance between the two languages but the distance between the translator and the text, the translator and the author, the translator and the editor. You must also have some sense of how the author, the translator, and the editor worked together to bridge those gaps.

I took my talk along the same trajectory. I began by describing the chasm between English and Turkish, which had no verb *to be* or a verb *to have* and a single word for *he, she, and it* but made a distinction between eyewitness reports and hearsay. An agglutinative language, Turkish linked root nouns to long strings of suffixes, thus dispensing with definite and indefinite articles and freestanding prepositions. Its love affair with the passive voice, its predilection for loosely linked verbal nouns, and its aversion to direct statements of fact meant that a fine Turkish sentence often obscured who did what. There was also, I explained, a vogue among Turkey's leading writers for the *devrik cümle*. This was a sentence—usually a very long sentence—in which words appeared in an order different from that ordained by custom and practice, and cascading clauses created a series of expectations that were subverted by the verb at the very end.

This meant that a master storyteller could offer up a string of allusive images that floated about unanchored and haiku-like until the last word pinned them down. (A translation of the first sentence of *The Black Book* would, if fairly faithful to the Turkish word order, read like this: “Of-the-bed from the head to its base—the blue checked quilt—its mountain ranges, shadowy valleys, and soft blue hills—veiled with—in the soft, warm darkness—Rüya facedown stretched-out slept.”)

As the poet Murat Nemet-Nejat once remarked, Turkish was a language that could evoke a thought unfolding. How might one bring that thought into English without smashing it to bits? I explained that the accepted view, especially among bilingual Turks, was that the translator should pay close attention to the sentence's “inner logic”—the elegant way in which the various parts reflected one another and together reflected the mystery that must never be coarsened by words, the games with voice and tense and the imaginative melding of different epochs and places in sentences that were

to be admired at length like pictures in a museum. For those at home inside the traditions of Turkish thought, the virtues of this approach were manifest. A translation that reflected the Turkish sentence's “inner logic” would open up like a flower to reveal its inner truth.

My own view was that poetry might allow such miracles, but the conventions of English prose did not. The strings of suffixes broke down into their component parts, spewing *from's, in's, of's, and not's* with nowhere to go. The passive voice became cumbersome and even obfuscating. Mesmerizing lists of verbal nouns (*the doing of . . . the seeing of . . . the having been done unto of*) began to grate on the nerves. The tenses were robbed of their nuances, and the graceful unfolding of cascading clauses became an ungainly procession of non sequiturs. The verb that should have been the twist in the tail appeared so early that it ruined the suspense: instead of gaining momentum, each sentence seemed to double back on itself. It was not just the meaning that was muffled, but the music.

I explained how music was central to my experience of Turkish—for I had learned the language as a child, listening to it swirl around me, reading the emotions long before I understood the words in which they traveled. I went on to describe how music informed my understanding of fiction itself. As a novelist, I put great faith in the narrative trance. If it worked, the reader entered into the fictive world and shut the door behind her. If the incantation failed, or if the trance was somehow broken, the reader was left looking at the words that blocked the way. Though Pamuk's language often asked to be noticed, his narrators spoke a powerfully musical Turkish that soon unlocked those words to sweep the reader into the “second world” of the book. In some of Pamuk's earlier English translations, the narrating Orhans lost their power to sing, thereby compromising their power to enchant. Other aspects of the novels—the ideas, the characters, the ingenious and double-jointed structures—were enough to draw many readers. Nevertheless, I would, I thought, reflect the spirit of the original only if, having ordered the words and linked the clauses in ways that made their meaning clear, I played them “by ear.” I was never satisfied, I said, until I could look at the English sentence and hear the Turkish music inside it.

Having made this point, I moved on to discuss the other “distances” on my list. I described how, after I had completed the first draft of a translation, I would send it to the author, who, after he had checked each sentence

against the Turkish, would invite me to the island where he spends his summers. We would then spend many long and hot days going through the text together, and together reworking any sentences that had failed to reflect his original intentions. I went on to describe how, when the translation made its way into print and the public eye, I became responsible not just for the text but for the proper understanding of its context, because the distance between the two cultures is as great as the distance between their languages.

Somehow I managed to cover all this ground and skirt the dark waters that almost claimed me last summer as I sat in my chair—the same chair I am sitting in today—retranslating *The Black Book*. But I was returned to them last week, as I was reading the opening pages of Daniel Simon's "Translation as a Model of Writing, Writing as a Mode of Translation." Simon takes as his starting point Marcel Proust's claim that a novelist is himself engaged in an act of translation, for "the essential, the only true book" is the one that sits inside him, waiting to be transformed by words. Proust, Simon reminds us, translated two books by Ruskin before undertaking *À la recherche du temps perdu*. After arguing that "metonymy may be as much or more at stake in translation than metaphor," he asserts that for Proust, "true translation does not 'embalm' the work so much as peel back the winding cloths from an 'original' to reveal the perpetual transfer taking place in the interstices of creation."

It is in this spirit that he proposes a closer look at the "types of problems Proust is trying to solve in his narrative, one of which is the problem of translating the *livre intérieur* into the public performance of a printed book." This chimed with my experience of (and my continuing fascination with) *The Black Book*, where Pamuk is engaged in just such an enterprise: this may be a deliberate mirroring, for Proust and his characters sit at the heart of the novel. There is even a sad tale about a writer so obsessed with Proust's works that he comes to believe himself their author.

Galip, the hero of *The Black Book*, is not a writer but a lawyer. We meet him as he gazes for the last time on his young and beautiful wife. Although a slavish translator might have written, "Of-the-bed from the head to its base—the blue checked quilt—its mountain ranges, shadowy valleys, and soft blue hills—veiled with—in the soft, warm darkness—Rüya facedown stretched-out slept," and a reasonably faithful translator might have written, "In the soft warm darkness beneath the blue-checked quilt whose mountain ranges, shadowy valleys

and soft blue hills stretched from the head of the bed to its base, Rüya was stretched face-down on the bed," I felt the detailed description of the quilt's topography, so quick and rhythmic in Turkish, sounded too much like sewing instructions when reassembled in English. The eye went to props, not to the sleeping woman whose name is the Turkish word for dream. So (after first seeking the author's permission) I went for a slightly less detailed sentence that might, I hoped, evoke the sorrow that would engulf the hero by the end of the paragraph.

Rüya was lying face down on the bed, lost to the sweet, warm darkness beneath the billowing folds of the blue-checked quilt. The first sounds of a winter morning seeped in from outside: the rumble of a passing car, the clatter of an old bus, the rattle of the copper kettles that the salep-maker shared with the pastry-cook, the whistle of the parking attendant at the *dolmuş* stop. A cold leaden light filtered through the dark blue curtains. Languid with sleep, Galip gazed at his wife's head: Rüya's chin was nestling in the down pillow. The wondrous sights playing in her mind gave her an unearthly glow that pulled him toward her even as it suffused him with fear. "Memory," Celâl had once written in a column, "is a garden." "Rüya's gardens, Rüya's gardens . . ." Galip had thought. "Don't think, don't think, it will make you jealous!" But as he gazed at his wife's forehead, he still let himself think.

By the time I had rendered that first paragraph in English, Galip's thoughts had become more real to me than my own. The words that I had hoped might take "the reader" into a narrative trance had claimed me as their first hostage. So off I went, sailing into the second world, leaving behind me a trail of English sentences that would, I hoped, lead other readers toward the music that now directed my thoughts.

So back to the story: by evening, Rüya has disappeared, and Galip suspects that she has gone into hiding with the above-mentioned Celâl, his famous (and famously treacherous) columnist cousin. After combing the city for clues, he at last discovers Celâl's secret apartment. It is the same apartment that Celâl once shared with his impoverished mother, and it is furnished just as it was then. Remembering an odd remark that Celâl had once made in passing—that, everything in the world being a copy of something else, a "False Celâl" wishing to write his columns in his place would need only "access to his memory"—Galip proceeds to rifle Celâl's archives. For he is now convinced that, if he assumes

Celâl's mind, he will be able to divine his whereabouts. He soon loses his way.

For . . . if Celâl's columns could suggest new meanings with every new reading, it followed that his own life would take on a new meaning every time he thought about it, and as he contemplated this endless freight train of meanings mercilessly multiplying into infinity, he feared he might lose himself inside it forever. It was growing dark outside and the almost palpable gray mist seeping in the room called to mind a spider-infested cellar thick with mold and the odor of death. Galip knew there was only one way out of this ghostly realm, this nightmare into which he had accidentally fallen, and that was to force his tired eyes to keep on reading. . . .

The longer he reads, the greater his dread: ". . . *it was as if he were dreaming, as if half his body had been ripped away from him and dispatched to a dark and distant place. . . .*"

But even as he comes to understand the deadly game into which his cousin has drawn him, he dives deeper into Celâl's archives. For he is almost there. The dark and wordless mystery at their heart is close enough to touch. Galip is now so familiar with Celâl's mind that he can assume his byline. As he prepares to write his first column in Celâl's name, he surveys the "fully furnished trap that Celâl had been so lovingly preparing for him all these years," and as he does so, he feels his very identity melting away.

Everything was falling into place now; even the smell of fresh paper was invigorating, and the words were pouring out. As his fingers hit the keys, singing their old familiar song, it was clear to him that he'd composed these words in his head a long time ago. Perhaps, from time to time, he had to pause to find the right word, but he let himself be directed by the flow of his thoughts—in Celâl's words, never forcing them.

He has arrived, perhaps, at the cliff edge feared and desired in equal measure by all translators of the "interior book"—the point at which he believes himself to have no choice, no purpose, but to serve the words that brought him here.

I have quoted these passages because they reflect my own emotions as I sat here in this chair last summer, translating Galip's thoughts into English. I had entered an underworld that belonged to someone else, and I had stayed to explore its most secret recesses. But I had

stayed too long, and now my own identity was peeling away. I felt I fully—unnervingly—understood. Even worse, I felt prefigured. For I was no longer the author of my own life. For as long as I remained inside this book, my fate was in the hands of *its* author. I had, I thought, no choice but to resign myself to the fully furnished trap he had made for me.

And for a time, I did. How long that was, I cannot say. I remember only a wordless awe as I surveyed this realm of someone else's making. Eventually I remembered what I'd been sent here to do. As I turned my attention to the next sentence, and to the music coming through it, I considered the dark underworld that had almost undone me. I would never find the words to replicate it in English, for there were no Turkish words that could replicate it either. Like its author and first translator, I could only hope to find the words that would open others' eyes to it.

I was past the halfway point by now. I still felt eighty leagues under the sea, but with every sentence I brought myself closer to the surface. What I most longed for was the freedom to breathe. Though I still heard the music of the Turkish, it was the music in my own English that kept me going, and typing the last words felt like coming up for air. Having lived to tell the tale, I of course long to be back inside it. The wordless awe is wordless still.

Though I would still say that my travels have followed a set pattern, and that my endpoint—my translation—maps the journey, I would like to add that it is not enough to know the scale. To understand a translation, you need to do more than measure the distance between the translator and the text. You must also find the moment at the heart of the story where all distance disappears.

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