


TRANSLATING THE CLASSICS AND THE AGENCY OF THE TRANSLATOR

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Translator

The contemporary translator of fiction is bound by conventions that do not necessarily trouble a theatre translator. The latter has to ensure that tickets are sold, that the production is financially viable, that audiences come, and so whole acts or characters can be erased, though these decisions may also be made by a director, or the writer who is often employed by the theatre company to work on the translation produced by someone who actually knows the original language. Whatever their place in this peculiar hierarchy in the English theatre, theatre translators know they are part of some kind of collaboration. The translator of fiction, however, is generally expected to translate what is on the pages of the original text: “fidelity” is the implied norm that is usually categorised in the translator’s contract as an instruction to be “faithful to the original in good literary English”. Large-scale changes are unusual and decisions to axe chapters will be taken by editors after they have read the translation—English publishers/editors tend not to read any foreign languages—though they may contract the translator to do any extensive edit and would seek the permission of the writer. Writers are keen to appear in English, and tend to acquiesce readily to such requests for cuts. For example, when I sent my translation of Miguel Sousa Tavares’s *Ecuador* to Bloomsbury (2009), the publisher, Liz Calder, thought that the opening fifty pages set in Lisbon and giving the historical context to the novel were too lengthy and over-delayed the real action, so they were cut with the author’s reluctant agreement.

Calder was also of the opinion that the various sex scenes were too clichéd and asked me to sharpen up the language, so the “steam” was less routine. Similarly, when Farrar Straus Giroux published Sánchez Piñol’s *Cold Skin* in Cheryl Leah Morgan’s translation (2005), they axed all references to the IRA, which they deemed to be unnecessary. Canongate in Edinburgh had included them in their edition earlier in that same year.

When it comes to the classics, the same conventions obtain in terms of translations for print publication, even though the writers may be dead and have long been out of copyright. Indeed, the weight of tradition and academic scholarship tend to reinforce the pressure on the translator to conform, and be reverential, especially in choice of lexis and narrative movement. Academic scholars exert another pressure inasmuch as they will often be asked to review translations of classics that fall within their foreign literary field. When my translation of Juan Carlos Onetti’s modern classic, *El pozo*, was published by Quartet Books (1991) as *The Pit*, Latin Americanist Jason Wilson criticised my choice of title in a review in the *Times Literary Supplement*, asserting that it should have been *The Well*, and that the French translator was correct to use *Le Puits*. I had in fact discounted that possibility as being too bucolic for Onetti’s grim tale of urban despair.

However, in the English-speaking world most translations, whether of classics or contemporary fiction, tend to be single editions, one-offs, with the exception of a small number of super classics by Cervantes, Dante, Flaubert, Tolstoy and other “household” names who are constantly re-translated and re-published alongside a growing number of noir authors, all of which benefit from film and television series versions. The first three super canonical authors’

most re-translated works are *Don Quixote*, *The Inferno* and *Madame Bovary*, which are guaranteed long reviews in the broadsheets and literary reviews. On the one hand, there must clearly be a market of readers who like to re-visit their favourite classics, and, on the other, critics are obviously fond of being given familiar foreign masterpieces to review. The phenomenon could equally be described as an exercise in intellectual inertia and a lack of a spirit of adventure in the realms of literary imagination.

There are also those classics that are re-translated less frequently, enjoy a brief presence on Anglo-Saxon horizons before vanishing out of sight once again. I would like to look at one case of a work that I have translated in order to underline the different levels of agency of the translator and the inevitable re-writing and re-interpretation that exists whatever any contractual clause says about “fidelity to the original”. When I left the British Centre for Literary Translation in 2003 and went to live in Barcelona to resume life as a full-time literary translator, I decided that I wanted to translate more classics as well as modern fiction. One work high on my list was *La Celestina*. I took the idea to Eric Lane at Dedalus Books, a small publishing house that specialises in European Classics. Eric accepted my proposal that came with a specific interpretation built-in – I wanted to shed the theatrical framework, and structure Fernando de Rojas’s masterpiece on the page as an embryonic novel. I was rather tired of the sequence of translations for the stage that always involved leaving out over half the work, and felt it was time for translation that firmly placed it in the European tradition of the novel. At the level of language I also told Eric that I wanted to avoid the attempts at archaic English present in most of those efforts for the theatre and create an English that would sound fresh

and original as English – if de Rojas was creating a new literary Spanish for his time, there didn’t seem much point in adding to the pseudo-Shakespearean English of my predecessors. If one wants that kind of English, much better to read James Mabbe’s translation (1631), that’s the real thing! At the level of characterisation and themes, I also wanted to bring out the originality of the protagonist as a septuagenarian with sexual desire and the intensity of social class conflict in a small Castilian city at the end of the fifteenth century. My publisher was enthusiastic on all fronts and I set to work. When the book came out (2009), it received *no* reviews whatsoever.¹

In the meantime I sent the translation to John Siciliano, the editor of Penguin Classics in the United States, who immediately bought the US rights, even though I had informed him that Margaret Sayers Peden was preparing a translation for Yale UP. I had talked about our different projects with Margaret at an ALTA conference, and knew that she intended to create a language that was full of archaic English. *Celestina*’s American publisher believed this was all to the good and would stimulate critical interest: reviewers would be faced by two radically different interpretations. Well, it didn’t, yet again no newspaper reviews, though both translations were reviewed for an academic journal specialising in medieval scholarship and Joseph Snow’s verdict was that my translation was lively but unreliable and Sayers Peden’s was more faithful.² In any case, the experience demonstrated

¹ Peter Bush, ‘The Centrality of a Translator’s Culture: Fernando de Rojas’s *Celestina* and the Creation of Style in Translation’, *The AALITRA Review: A Journal of Literary Translation*, No.2 (Melbourne: Monash University, 2009), 21–36.

² Review of translations of *La Celestina*, by J. T. Snow, *La corónica, A Journal of Medieval Hispanic Languages, Literatures and Cultures*, 327–331.

yet again that at the level of general readerships and mainstream press reviewers there was no burning desire to go beyond *Don Quixote* as the single representative of classical Spanish fiction in the European canon.

Nevertheless, the contributions by Eli Cohen and Ilan Stavans in the present volume reveal respectively how our knowledge of past translations of *Don Quixote* have been severely skewed by an over-reverence that poured scorn on John Phillips's 1687 translation and how translation into new languages within the English-speaking world like Spanglish can open up opportunities for new readerships to gain access to the novel. Both writers are academics interested in bringing a more subversive gaze to a canonical text that has more usually been sanitised as simply a "fun-book" by scholars opposed to more historical or ideological readings.

Eli Cohen details the uniformly hostile reception of John Phillips's translation: "hateful filthiness of the most foul production" (Diffield, 1881); a "travesty" (Ormsby, 1887); "a disgraceful performance" (Putnam, 1949). His historical analysis of Phillip's bold re-writing of *Don Quixote* shows how he was keen to speak to his contemporaries for political reasons, creating an "English according to the Humour of our Modern Language", that suggests an ironic commentary on the licentiousness and libertinism of the court of Charles II, or for some, "anti-Catholic satire" by this nephew of John Milton. The action is transferred to London taverns and streets and the language revels in sexual innuendo and ribald remarks from the very start: of the Don's steed—"The horse that eats no Oats, no Oats can shite", and of his family—"the Niece of Twenty for private recreation". A number of Cervantine scholars like Eli Cohen and Jonathan Thacker are drawing attention to Phillips in the light of the new

theoretical interest in the agency of the literary translator and translation as writing that is both re-creation and original. One eagerly awaits a modern edition of Phillips's translation, an event that would crown his writerly achievements and de-sanctify centuries of staid "fidelity" by translators over-awed by an original that is, in fact, constantly being jocular towards the act of translation.

Ilan Stavans is a university professor who has written scholarly books and articles on the subject of *Don Quixote*, but he is also an atypical academic Hispanist who sees scholarship as "an act of rebellion" and has a desire to reach the general public, and in the context of Cervantes, to bring his masterpiece "to a community of readers prone to other types of entertainment". Such projects call for "a creative edge" in re-creations of the novel in Spanglish, a hybrid, non-standard form of English used by millions of citizens of the United States. Here we publish excerpts from two of Stavan's recent Spanglish adaptations: one is prose fiction; the other is in the form of a cartoon comic drawn by Roberto Weil, accompanied by bubbles with Stavans's Spanglish. In the present political context in the USA these adaptations can be seen as hugely subversive in that they legitimise and give literary form to a language used by millions who find themselves under attack from a xenophobic president, and a media culture where non-standard forms of language are constantly ridiculed and caricatured, and demonised by "reality" television shows. Like Phillips's translation, they also challenge conventional adherence to "fidelity" in translation, and academic pedantry that seeks to ring-fence *Don Quixote* for an elite, a novel whose myriad stories have been plundered for centuries by popular entertainers and are now recreated across the new technologies for entertainment as discussed

elsewhere in this volume. Unlike the weighty tomes of annotated anniversary editions produced by cohorts of humourless dons, Stavans's Spanglish versions sparkle with humour and intelligence and reach out to readers who might otherwise have considered Cervantes to be beyond them.

The focus that both Cohen and Stavans bring to the conscious re-writing of translators indirectly lends support to my interpretation of the Borges story about Pierre Ménard that has been turned into a speculative parable on the nature of translation by scholars like George Steiner.³ The French man is clearly not translating, but *copying* out the original text, and though this could trigger different mental states at the time of his various bouts of copying, they are mental states far removed from an act of re-writing. The act of translating the story into English immediately confronts the translator with the task of translating the quotation from Cervantes's text. Does he or she use an existing translation, leave the quotation in Spanish, or make a new translation that chimes with the overall strategy of the translation? Leaving it in Spanish would obfuscate for the reader the key nature of the quotation Borges chose. Translating it into whatever version would demonstrate the palpable opposition between serial copying and a translator's re-writing. It would also point up the agency of translators as exemplified by the creative process of decision-making and honing of style through *acts* of translation that lead to different arrays of letters on the page driven by a range of critical insights and writerly moves.

To underline the continued literary conservatism that lingers on in the tradition of *Don*

Quixote translations and remains opposed to the scurrilous spirit of seventeenth-century Phillips or the subversive language choice of twenty-first-century Stavans, I would like to comment on a fragment from *Don Quixote* and Sancho Panza's visit to Barcelona towards the end of Part II as translated by John Ormsby, Edith Grossman and John Rutherford. The men from La Mancha are taken to the harbour by their host Don Antonio Moreno and are invited on board a ship, the captain of which is delighted to have the opportunity to meet these characters who had so famously featured in Part One of the novel:

pasóse el cómitre en crujía y dio señal con el pito que la chusma fuera ropa, que se hizo en un instante. Sancho, que vio tanta gente en cueros, quedó pasmado...

the boatswain passed along the gangway and piped all hands to strip, which they did in an instant. Sancho, seeing such a number of men stripped to the skin, was taken aback...

(John Ormsby, 1885)

the boatswain walked in to the midship gangway and piped the order to strip, which was done in an instant. Sancho was astonished to see so many half-naked men...

(John Rutherford, 2000)

the boatswain passed along the midship gangway and signalled on his whistle for the oarsmen to strip to the waist, which they did instantly. Sancho was stunned to see so many people undressed...

(Edith Grossman, 2003)

The reader imagines that Sancho has had little previous experience of the sea and that this being the first time that he has been aboard a galley driven by galley-slaves, he is astonished

³ Peter Bush, "Intertextuality and the Translator as Story-teller", *Palimpsestes*, 18, (Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle) 15 June 2006, 213-229.

by the dramatic sight of so many men being ordered to strip stark naked. There is little to choose between these fragments, though in the paragraphs from which they are taken, only John Rutherford uses the word “galley-slaves”, but not in this particular couple of sentences. Ormsby uses “crew” or “men” or “hands”, perhaps his decorous Victorian sensibility was averse to the mention of slaves? Edith Grossman’s choices reveal an even more strenuous desire for an inoffensive translation, in line with the contemporary requirement of political correctness. She constantly uses “oarsmen”. On the other hand, Ormsby does have “the men stripped to the skin” whereas Rutherford has them “strip” and then “half-naked” and Grossman has “stripped to the waist” and then “undressed”, and explains in a footnote that this is so they are ready to start rowing. The order piped was for the slaves to take off their clothes, which instantly left them stark naked, and it is this sudden spectacle of stark nakedness that shocks Sancho. There is a remarkable sameness about the three translations in their lack of dramatic physicality in terms of Sancho’s reactions,

and the actual scene of rags being cast off and naked flesh exposed. This, in turn, softens the impact later in the paragraph when Sancho is picked up and tossed round the boat by the slaves.

In conclusion, the agency of literary translators of prose fiction, even of much translated canonical works like *Don Quixote*, continues to be restricted by a publishing culture that expects a “fidelity” that leans towards conventional literary style and a tone that is neither jagged nor jarring, mellowing detail that might shock. The agency of some translators, as described here, involves an acceptance of this culture. Eli Cohen’s account of Phillips’s subversive Cervantes and Ilan Stavans’s Spanglished Cervantes show the potential for radically innovative translations that open up the text to other readerships. Perhaps it is time for a translator to attempt a re-writing of *Don Quixote* that is disturbing, doesn’t shy away from underlying themes of social and political conflict and retains the violence and the comedy. Could any publisher be drawn to a more staccato, gritty narrative movement for Sancho and his master?