

The Irresistible Temptation of Treason. “But I like the idea of having a choice”

Pseudo-interview with Dana Crăciun

I am beginning to write this on September 30th, which is International Translation Day. Yes, believe it or not, there is such a thing, celebrated on the day of St. Jerome, the patron saint of translation. Although this will appear in print a lot later, I do want to wish all my fellow translators out there Happy Translation Day. Here's hoping you all celebrated properly and were adequately spoiled and managed to forget, at least for one day, that we are all... traitors.

Traduttore, traditore, that most enduring of clichés, seems to have confined the fate of translators to the category of necessary evils. Even people who do not know much about translation (and who sometimes don't even stop to think that they're reading something in translation) will know this commonplace and will hurl it into the conversation with the same confidence one would express a piece of meteorological observation. “Translators are traitors” has the same certainty value as “It's raining outside” when it is actually raining outside. I have found myself in numerous situations, in various countries, having to introduce myself and mentioning that I am also a translator. It would be dispiriting to count how often I've heard this as a first reaction to my confession.

The nature of the treason and its consequences are fascinating topics that have elicited more or less impassionate responses from a variety of people involved in the process, from writers to publishers to translators themselves. When speaking of the “art” of translation, Vladimir Nabokov identifies three evils, or three degrees of evil, that translators commit: ignorance, willingly skipping passages (either because they don't understand them or because they think such passages would not be appropriate for the target audience), and, worst of all, the “beautification” of a text so as to meet the sensibilities of the target audience. For Gregory Rabassa, the highly acclaimed translator into English of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, the highest treason a translator can commit is against him/herself and his/her instincts.

Translators don't always fare well among academics either. Sometimes they're found lacking in theoretical sophistication, at other times their work is dissected in seminars by people who don't even have a translator's background. Translation is, however, an increasingly popular subject in the academia. So popular, in fact, that some people take

translation classes even though they don't speak any foreign languages. The most intriguing situation I have come across so far was a translation seminar in the United States, taught by a multilingual professor to a class of solidly monolingual students. The wisdom according to which translation is an act of imagination must have been put into practice with a vengeance here. In the literary world as well there seems to be a fashion taken up by many writers – poets mainly – to translate from poets whose native languages the “translator” has little or even no knowledge of.

Not only is a translator's occupation a matter of some distrust, the profession can actually be downright dangerous. The likes of William Tyndale and Hitoshi Igarashi learnt the hard way that translating can end in worse than mere accusations of cultural treason.

As I'm reflecting on the whole idea of being a translator at this moment in time, the autumn of 2012, when I've just finished translating another book and I'm beginning to feel again the “translator's itch” (though, as always, I promised myself this was going to be my last project), the question I find intriguing is why translators persist in committing their crime. Why do they keep on doing what they're doing despite the outer world's perception and despite their own inner doubts and misgivings? This is the question I am going to try to address at the very small scale of my own personal experience.

I became a translator almost fourteen years ago somewhat by chance. I owe it to two of my university professors. One of them enabled me to guess how it's done at the end of a two hour class when we worked on (though didn't finish) the translation of one sentence; the other trusted my yet unproved skill enough to recommend me for a serious project. I also owe it to a review I wrote of a translation that I thought was not great. Thinking of why it was not great and dissecting the matter proved so fascinating that I could not let go. I owe it to the brave publisher of the novel that got the no-so-great review, who was willing to risk and thus enabled me to have a most amazing first book. The first novel I ever translated was Salman Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh*. In terms of career openers, it can't get much better than that. Finally, I owe it to everything and everybody that made words and texts excruciatingly irresistible for me.

Over these almost fourteen years, I have translated thirteen books of fiction, two and a half of non-fiction, half a book of poetry, as well as essays, articles, and excerpts whose count I have not kept. It may not be an awful lot, but it's still a reasonable amount given that, as most literary translators, I've also kept a full time job (occasionally two...). In other words, I have committed a bit of treason in my life. As a result, I've been shortlisted twice for a translation prize (though to this day I puzzle over the criteria for a translation prize) and I've earned a rebuke from a Romanian Orthodox

Church suddenly (and briefly) interested in the welfare of Islam on the occasion of the publication of *The Satanic Verses* in Romanian. I've lost a ridiculous number of hours of sleep and I've made a few very important friendships. I've had to forego a couple of holidays but I've travelled to most amazing places, sometimes several at the same time. More than anything, I have become addicted.

The main thing I have become addicted to is the sheer challenge. Evidently, each book comes with its own set of brand new challenges but because of the path my translation career has taken, I could compartmentalise a little and say that for me it's been "the Rushdie challenge" and "everything else".

"The Rushdie challenge" is too multi-layered to exhaust but I will mention some of the recurrent issues I've had to deal with and some of the surprises I've had along the way. The main challenge and the main surprise is India itself. Rushdie's style, his use of non-English vocabulary, and his intricate syntax are the delight of critics but can become a headache for a translator. Which degree of treason does the translator commit? Or, to echo Rushdie's own question in "The Courter", "what does the poor bewildered opponent do"? What do you focus on? Should your allegiances lie primarily with your readers, or should you remain faithful to the author, even when he is mind-bogglingly intricate? I have to confess that over the years I have become more and more of a "sourcer" and I strongly believe in the importance of preserving as much of the original flavour as possible. A certain degree of strangeness, or foreignness, is not necessarily a sign of bad translation. On the contrary, I would argue that a translation that sounds too much as if it had been written in the target language is more likely to be problematic, in the sense that it may have suffered a higher degree of intervention from the translator-writer. Such a belief does not necessarily put me in Lawrence Venuti's camp but it does align me with those who believe it's important to allow the phantom of the author to linger in the translation and to overpower the phantom of the target-language reader. An apparently awkward syntax needn't be a sign of an awkward translation (though I admit it can be). It could simply echo a syntax that is not entirely standard in the source text either. Long, run-on sentences can be all right; that may be how the character thinks. Breaking them for the benefit of the target reader is... well, yes, an act of treason. Trying to preserve the "foreignness" is definitely a risk. It is a balancing act that can easily go wrong and once you've lost your footing you fall in the pit where the monsters of "barbarism" and "solecism" live. And those are serious treasons.

However contradictory it may sound, I am also a believer in footnotes. I'm familiar with all the counter-arguments and I've heard them often. If the reader wants to know what *aloo gobi* is, s/he can look it up; if

the reader does not notice an intertextual nod, no harm done. Maybe. But I like the idea of having a choice. If readers want to know more but don't really want to look things up at that particular moment, they can read the footnote; if not, they can easily ignore it. As with everything, balance is the key. Footnotes should be used, not abused. I confess the hardest to resist is the temptation to do extensive notes on food, or recipes. Rushdie's books have opened up not only a treasure trove of linguistic challenges, but also an entirely new culinary universe. The way I think of them, the way I remember them, they're always more than just text and rhythm. They're also fragrance and flavour, in the most literal of senses. When working on the *Moor* I often dreamed of being able to include olfactory footnotes.

While there are always plenty of textual challenges, the biggest contextual one has been the translation of *The Satanic Verses*. It proved impossible to get rid of the novel's troubled history. The few people who knew I was working on the translation tried to convince me to sign with a pseudonym, citing the unfortunate fate of some of the novel's previous translators. I have been called pretty much everything from naïve to brave to vain for choosing to sign with my own name. It puzzled me then, and it still does, that these people did not seem to be aware of the contradictory nature of their positions. The novel was finally being translated and published because the publisher was trying to make a most necessary statement of normalcy. This book needed to join the Rushdie collection and needed to be given the chance to have the normal life of a book. At the same time, though, people treated the novel as anything but normal, thus perpetuating the hype and getting in the way of that much needed return to common sense.

Very few of the responses to the book focused on the intricacies of the text and on the ambitious way in which Rushdie tries again to connect the East and the West, the past and the present, the religious and the secular, dream and reality, home and exile, etc. Apart from the usual Rushdiean difficulties, I was also faced with the challenge of a multitude of narrative perspectives, each with its own distinctive voice, rhythm, and baggage of cultural allusions. The range of style and register is even more impressive than in the *Moor* and I often felt I was being forced by the text to turn into a kind of concertina that had to effortlessly produce all tones, from the tense street language of immigrant London to the soft, dreamy notes of the butterfly girl, Ayesha.

The most challenging of Rushdie's books and my favourite texts to work on have been his children's books: *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* and *Luka and the Fire of Life*. Rushdie's linguistic imagination is at its absolute best in these books written for his two sons. From *Iff the Water Genie* and *Butt the Mechanical Hoopoe* to the *Insultana of Ott* and the *Respectorate of I* to all the mythological references imaginable, the world created in the two

books is a reader's delight and a translator's nightmare. There is, however, something extra-special about working on a pun meant for kids. In this case, you know you have to stay away from footnotes. The best way to go about it is to try to think with the freshness of a child's mind.

I have focused so much on Salman Rushdie because he is the one I have spent most time with. However, there have been other journeys as well, whose itineraries have offered different kinds of challenges and moments of euphoria and defeat. Maybe the most ethically troublesome was Martin Amis's *Time's Arrow*. Before starting this project I hadn't realised how serious my personal resistance to literature about the Holocaust was. I used to think, and I still do to a certain extent, that there's something ethically problematic about it. It's a very complicated issue and there's no reason to focus on it here. Suffice it to say it raised an unexpected obstacle which I had to learn to overcome as I was working on the text. It helped that the novel is making the "creation" argument and is using a rather peculiar technique to do it (the narrative is in reverse, with sections where the sentences and even words are in reverse order). The technical challenges enabled me to put aside whatever personal feelings I may have had about the issue. This was a situation when it was imperative for the translator to become invisible.

More recently I've been faced with another kind of challenge. Romanian publishers are increasingly trying to bring translations out "in real time", that is, very soon after the publication of the original or even at the exact same time (as was the case with my latest project, Salman Rushdie's memoirs). This means the translator has to start working on a manuscript that is not always completed. As you work on the translation, the writer is also working on finishing the book. It is, undoubtedly, very intriguing to see the changes that can still occur and to be able to gauge the various editorial decisions. At the same time, it can be frustrating. You think you're done with a section of the book only to receive an email with an "updated version". I was almost finishing Jeffrey Eugenides *The Marriage Plot* when the final text came with a significantly reworked first chapter. While all this is happening, you are of course trying to meet the same deadlines as before.

The most fascinating thing about translation, the main reason I persist in the crime, is the learning process. There is no limit to the number of doors one single text can open. In every translated book that gets published there are countless others that have contributed to the making of that translation. That is something I have tried to explain to my students on the rare occasions I have actually taught translation seminars. I find translation very difficult to teach. Probably the main reason is that I don't quite know how to teach patience and curiosity. I firmly believe that

without an abundance of these two virtues and without a fascination for inhabiting multiple worlds, teaching translation is virtually impossible.

Translators may not get a lot of recognition, but they do get the wonderful opportunity of living in different worlds at the same time. When working on the translation, the text is always with you. You might be going about your daily business, tending to your other jobs, spending time with your family, etc., but in fact you're thinking about the particular difficulty you're dealing with at the moment, you're reciting the latest passage that seems a bit resistant to your efforts, you're trying to make sense of this or that character's speech peculiarities. Also, you're constantly living in two languages and (at least) two cultures. And yes, you must constantly deal with the perils of this induced schizophrenia.

I suppose what I call my addiction to challenges could be seen by some as a form of masochism. I have often been given (by friends, family, as well as perfect strangers) long lists of reasons why one should not be a translator. A lot of these reasons make some kind of sense: it is a ridiculously time-consuming occupation, the pay is not very good (particularly when compared to the time invested), you start from the assumption of failure (or at least imperfection), you turn schizophrenic, you lose sleep, you struggle to meet unfriendly deadlines, you get called different names, etc. Sometimes you even have the surprise of seeing your work tampered with by some corrector who intervenes in the text at the last moment without bothering to ask you or your editor. You have to constantly struggle to reach a balance between your instincts and what reason and instruction tell you about various solutions. However, I'd still say that the brief moments of triumph when you think you've found a solution, as well as the amazing learning process are worth it. It's true that at the end of each and every book I say, "this was the last one". So far I haven't been able to keep my promise. Who knows, there might be more truth to the accusation of treason than we, as translators, would like to admit. But, to echo Patrick Henry's famous words on the eve of the American Revolution, "if this be treason, make the most of it". And making the most of it is what I suspect most translators do best.

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