

TRANSLATION AS SPIRITUAL COMMUNITY

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ABSTRACT: This paper firstly clarifies two contrasting attitudes in translation, secondly expounds the meaning of the act of translation itself with a paradoxical sense of history as a core idea, and lastly demonstrates a couple of cases from the actual difficulties

encountered by the author of this paper in the process of a translation.

KEY WORDS: Freedom; History; Spiritual community; Translation.

Yehuda Amichai, a leading Israeli poet, said, "The poem should be robust enough to speak through or despite the translation, just as the Bible survives many translations". This is a statement made by a poet who has full confidence in what he writes and Amichai's poems indeed survive many translations, even retranslations from English versions. As is often the case with Amichai, he does not elaborate what he means by "robust" but it is clear. The power of emotions and ideas expressed in the original do survive even if technical elaborations are lost or lessened through translation. Nevertheless, this does not imply the insignificant role of translation. If it were the fact, we translators need not have such tough, agonizing time as we now do.

The original text indeed loses something in translation regardless of the quality of the translation. It is inevitable. Let me quote Amichai's another comment: when asked whether his poetry loses something in translation, he answered. "Yes, sure, but we lose things all the time. We lose weight, but that can be a good thing".¹ In his typical way of explaining things in everyday, concrete examples with a touch of humour, his remark hits a vital point. Discarding unnecessary decorative elements can make poems better. May our translations work that way all the time.

When two languages involved are as different as Hebrew and Japanese, the act of translation becomes even harder. Problems which arise in the process of translation are not only

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¹ From an interview by Edgar Reichman published in *UNESCO Courier*, October 1994.

those concerning how to transpose one language to another, but also how to transpose one culture to another, an entirely different culture. And sometimes one cannot do the latter simply because the gulf between the two cultures is too enormous. Then the translator confronts a real plight. There will be detailed discussions on this point later in this paper.

DEGREE OF FREEDOM

The issue is a good old one: how much freedom are translators granted in their work?

A heated debate took place on this issue, as expected, at the International Conference For Translators Of Hebrew Literature held in Jerusalem in 1994. Hillel Halkin, a distinguished translator of Hebrew literature into English, made his position clear by stating that translators have absolute freedom in their work and the translated text is something other than the original, independent from it. He even makes a grave decision, if necessary, of crossing out a couple of lines from the original text.

To this rather provocative remark, Gabriella Avigur-Rotem, an Israeli novelist, reacted very strongly. She said: "As a writer, I felt that I'm a schnitzel that you'd be serving up, and I don't want to be changed by your sauce or to be cooked up by you" (Halter).

This is a case in point which plainly illustrates our present issue.

Halkin, facing many conflicting responsibilities as a translator (to the author, to the reader, to the new translated text, etc.), thinks it utmost duty for him to make translated text readable and natural. Unreadability, he said, is the greatest betrayal of an author. In the case of the works of dead authors, Halkin's attitude might pass, since the original authors are not

here to strike back. However, there are always authors, alive or dead, like Avigur-Rotem who refuse to be "cooked up" by translators. For them Halkin's attitude is a crime.

I would like to quote, as an example, a passage from two different English translations of S. Y. Agnon to show how different they can be.

The first is Hillel Halkin's translation.

"The rain fell noiselessly. Through a curtain of mist so thick that he could not see his own self the image of Blume appeared as brightly before him as it had on the day she had stroked his head in her room after walking out and returning. Hirshl ressed his head on the latch of the gate and began to cry".
(Agnon, 1985)

The second is Robert Alter's version.

"Silently, silently the rain fell. A veil is cast over all the world, and you don't even see yourself. But Blume's image rises up before you as on the day she stroked your head when you entered her room and she fled and came back. Hirshl ressed his head on the handles of the bolt and began to weep". (Alter, 1994)

Alter's is a "rather literal translation" as opposed to "Hillel Halkin's fluent, idiomatic version which in its freedom with the original substitutes a modern American literary diction for Agnon's arch stylization" (Alter, 1994)

What Alter is trying to do here is to capture and retain the original style and mood as much

as possible, about which he elaborates in his book and I need not repeat here. However, I would just like to draw attention to the first line of this passage, so that we can see how successful Alter is in conveying the essence of the original. The original Hebrew sentence, "*d'mumim d'mumim yardu hag'shmim*", with the repetition of the same word which also produces a nice onomatopoeic effect is recreated in the Alter's version to the utmost degree a translation can attain. It proves that a literal translation, in some cases, obviously surpasses a fluent, idiomatic one.

Halkin no doubt has greater liberty than Alter: he exercises his power over the original text and almost creates a new text rather than a translation as he himself declared to do. Alter, on the other hand, is trying to be faithful to the original, which one might perhaps call a slavery to the original text. But is it really so? The issue, in my view, lies not in the difference of degrees of freedom exercised by the two translators, but in the difference of the levels on which they work.

TRANSLATION AS SPIRITUAL COMMUNITY

Viewing the act of translation from a little different angle, or rather on a different level, one could almost say "*Everything is a translation of what comes before it*". Yehuda Amichai writes in one of his poems:

*All the generations before me contributed me
Little by little so I will emerge here in Jerusalem
all at once, like a prayer house or philanthropy
That compels. My name is the name of my
contributors.*

That compels. (Amichai, 1994)

In the translators' conference mentioned earlier, Amichai said much the same thing as this poem: human beings "*are kind of genetic, biological translation of the generations that precede them. Culturally, everything we do is based on what has been done before us, so we translate that heritage into our present cultural currency*".

We are all part of a larger stream of human activities, no matter how strongly we claim our individuality and creativity. To realize this fact is both consoling and discouraging: consoling because we know we are not alone and we are not the first to experience whatever we experience, and discouraging because we feel small and futile in repeating what has been done before us.

It is, however, when we identify ourselves as heirs of tradition that we come to terms with those feelings: that is, the feelings of consolation and futility merge into one to be reborn as a conscious attitude of participating in a vast continuity of human activities – history and tradition.

Acute consciousness of taking part in and creating history, hence keeping tradition, does not arise from an easy conservative attitude of "*We just have to do as our grandparents and parents did*". This is mere blind repetition. Such an attitude is bound to be stagnant and lifeless. When, on the other hand, there is a sense of history, which is "*a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together*" as T. S. Eliot writes in his famous essay, "Tradition and The Individual Talent", lifeless stagnation, as a matter of fact, is impossible. It is impossible because this extremely paradoxical sense of history compels one to be alert, in the sense that one is never allowed to rest in just one time zone, namely either in the past or in the present.

One is compelled to shift, so to speak, from the past to the present, and from the present to the past. Such an oscillation, no doubt, is very uncomfortable: in fact, it never permits one to be happily settled in a single state. It also requires one's awareness of each motion one is consciously and subconsciously taking. Keeping this awareness in such instability is demanded if one is to have this extraordinary sense of history. It is a sense that transcends time, but remains simultaneously within time: the latter factor is important for the full recognition of the Here and Now, without which it is unlikely for us to have any perspective of history.

Here, we realize, another paradox is working. When a writer attains such a historical sense, Eliot goes on to say, he/she becomes most acutely conscious of his/her place in time, of his/her own contemporaneity. In other words, in order fully to recognize one's position and the present situation, this historical sense is indispensable. It is indeed an ultimate paradox and *tour de force* to have such a sense of history.

This paradox is seen clearly in traditional arts in almost any country. Japan is no exception: in traditional arts, such as Kabuki or Noh Play, to name but two, mastery of traditional techniques and styles through long, painstaking trainings is a must and essential. An artist is a mere cog in a huge machine, namely tradition, and this cog has to be shaped and oiled with utmost care so as to make it work well in the machine. The training is so thorough that there is absolutely no place for an individual personality to assert itself. Just when, however, individuality of an artist appears to be totally annihilated, something extraordinary occurs. When an artist becomes conscious of what he/she is going through, that is, what he/she is acquiring by following the ways of the past, suppressed individuality, dormant for a long period, starts burgeoning. This

miracle happens, needless to say, only when the artist has full consciousness of what he/she does. Hence Eliot's words: "*It [tradition] cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour*". (Eliot, 1972)

Tradition, then, can be called an act of transfer. It is to transfer things of the past to the context of the present: it is to re-create the past in the present. Though what is transferred is seemingly mere repetition of past things, it is in actuality by no means so. Re-creation of things of the past in the present context, if executed with acute sense of history and tradition, can hardly be mere repetition. There are always subtle differences from the original. It is, one could say, repetition with differences. When Kierkegaard writes, "*What is recollected... is repeated backward, whereas genuine, repetition is recollected forward*", the word repetition acquires a meaning of a higher plane. What Kierkegaard tries to express by 'genuine repetition' is exactly repetition with differences in my words.

The act of transfer, repetition with subtle differences in other words, always involves a distance either in time or in place, or both. It is an act of crossing over this distance. When crossing over, an artist, on the one hand, transcends time and stands somewhere between the two time poles or above them, but, on the other hand, he/she is forming a bridge down there over a cleavage. Such double acts, performed simultaneously, demand a continuous state of psychological tension. It is a tension which makes an artist feel almost ripped apart into two. Those who have enough spiritual toughness to sustain this emotion are able to perform the act of crossing over.

This, then, brings us back to the discussion of translation. The act of translation is to transfer a text in one language to that in another

crossing over a distance in time and in space. Whether the transfer is vertical, meaning crossing over a gulf of time, or horizontal, meaning crossing over that of space, the core of the action is the same. Crossing over a vast gulf requires courage. Translation is a battlefield, specially on a practical level, about which I shall demonstrate later. It is, however, at the same time a multi-layered reciprocal relationship between the original text (author/poet) and the translator.² There is, in this relationship, even a touch of communion, if I may use a religious term, though this ought not to be understood as a state of devotion totally devoid of a critical faculty on the part of the translator. If, it ought to be emphasized, this kind of two-way inter-relationship does not exist, both original and translated texts suffer.

They suffer because the translator, in such a case, is not consciously taking part in a community created by the original text (author/poet) and the translator.

In a spiritual community unifying the original text (author/poet) and the translator, the translator endeavours to get as close to the original as possible despite (or perhaps because of) the distance between them. The translator's work, in fact, is twofold: the first and the foremost, the translator is an active reader of the original work and second, he/she is a re-creator in another language of the original in response to the stimulation and inspiration roused by it. The former involves critical reading of the text and profound appreciation, which is probably called

creative reading. This creative reading, it should be clear, does not imply that the reader has the decisive power and creates almost a new text through his/her interpretation of the original. On the contrary, there always ought to be utmost fidelity to the original text and the author/poet behind it: this fidelity, needless to say, is not a blind one but that which allows healthy reciprocity between the original text (author/poet) and the translator. Unless the reciprocity works on spiritual as well as intellectual levels, what I call a community between the original text (author/poet) and the translator is hardly possible.

An American Japanologist who teaches Japanese literature in a Japanese university and who at the same time is a poetess as well as a distinguished translator of Japanese literature into English, once wrote that when she had first learned, as a graduate student in the U. S., about Honkadori [elaborate adaptation from a famous, often ancient poem: a poetical technique used in Japanese traditional Waka or Haiku poems], she was struck by a community of voices encompassing poets of several centuries apart.³ She was impressed by the fact that a newer poem is a kind of response to the old original one (Honka) and the reader, thus, witnesses a miraculous dialogue performed transcending the time span of many centuries. Honkadori is not translation, but I find its core spirit quite similar to that of the act of translation.

The ideal relationship between the original text (author/poet) and the translator, in my view, is a community in this sense. And the community consists of dialogues between the two. A dialogue, by definition, takes place between two different entities, which implies, to start with, a

2 The author of this paper is, of course, aware that there exists a literary theory which advocates the absolute independence of the text from its author. This, however, is not the position taken by the present author. Hence the juxtaposition needs a little more elaboration, it is omitted here since it will digress from the immediate theme of this paper.

3 Ooka Makoto, a Japanese poet and critic, quotes Janine Beichman's article and refers to her ideas in his book entitled *The Poet Sugawara-no Michizane*, Tokyo, Iwanami Publishing House, 1989.

recognition of the Other. Even though, therefore, a translator tries to get as close to the original as possible, it is, in fact, impossible, and it should be impossible, for him/her to become one with the original. A prerequisite for recognition of the Other is a distance, which compels one to be solitary. As a result, however lively and deeply this dialogue may be conducted, the final decision as to which word to choose and which style to choose is the translator's, except for the case of collaboration between the two. A translator, in the event, has to take a deadly leap. And there is, alas, no God to judge which leap is right and which is wrong.

AGONY OF A TRANSLATOR

The Israeli novelist Amos Oz once demanded a Hebrew phrase '*kos te*' to be translated literally as '*a glass of tea*' rather than a more idiomatic English expression '*a cup of tea*'.

Though this episode might seem insignificant, it in fact reveals a fairly important aspect of translation. Why '*a glass of tea*' rather than '*a cup of tea*'? When you see a phrase '*a cup of tea*', the first association in your mind is a scene in England, perhaps an old couple or a group of ladies cosily sitting in a living room or in a neatly cared garden having afternoon tea with cookies or scones. This is an association which automatically comes up in the reader's mind, particularly in England. Such an established association, Oz is aware and trying to point out, is a danger – a danger that a translated text ruins the whole atmosphere and the soul of the original work.

A world which is evoked by an expression '*a cup of tea*' is decidedly different from what the author Oz meant to create by '*a glass of tea*'. He insisted on keeping '*a glass*' because

a country where people drink tea out glasses, not cups, has its own culture nurtured in its history, customs, geographical characteristics and climate. And this culture certainly forms a basis for literary works. Hence Oz's determined refusal of the translation of '*a glass of tea*' into '*a cup of tea*' despite the fact that '*a glass of tea*' sounds odd to the English speaking reader. Oz, in effect, chose a literal translation sacrificing a smooth, natural sound of the translated text, which is, to remind you, the attitude discarded by Hillel Halkin as was mentioned at the beginning of this paper.

In the actual process of translation, you are often forced to make decisions. This is no easy task since there are cases where you simply cannot find an answer no matter how hard and how long you contemplate. Here are a couple of examples from my experience of translating Amos Oz's *Kufsa shehorah* (*Black Box* in English) into Japanese.⁴

As a symbolic example of a clash of two different languages I would like to draw attention to just one Hebrew word in *Black Box*: *im'chem*. This tiny word gave me a considerable headache and finally defeated me.

A female protagonist of this novel signed off her last letter to her present husband with this word. The word *im'chem*, having no single equivalent word in English, can be translated as '*your mother*' but this is by no means accurate. This '*your*' in Hebrew is a plural, masculine (or mix gender) possessive pronoun, the meaning of which is all lost in the English equivalent '*your mother*' since the English '*your*' is ambiguous in terms of gender and number. This word, in the final event, means that (1) "*I am*

⁴ The Japanese translation of *Kufsa Shehorah* was published in Japan by Chikuma Shobo Publishing House in March, 1994.

your [the husband's] mother", (2) "I am your [of the two men, her previous husband and the present one] mother", (3) "I am your [of all menfolks on the earth] mother", (4) "I am your [of all human race struggling in the universe] mother", revealing in a subtle way a megalomaniac, or fantasizing, aspect of this woman who appears to personify the archetypal Great Mother.

Nicholas de Lange, who translated most of Oz's books into English and for whom Oz himself shows tremendous amount of confidence and admiration, solved this problem in this case by translating this word into 'Mother' with a capital M, cleverly connoting double, triple meanings hidden this word as well as one of the polyhedral personalities of the woman.

My translation of this word into Japanese encountered the same problem. The Japanese language does not have gender and it does not even have single/plural forms in a strict sense. To convey such a complex, symbolic significance of the word *im'chem* in this context was out of the question: you could, of course, explain the whole meaning in a couple of sentences, but what was required of me was to replace this word by just one Japanese word, or a couple of words at the most, which carries the whole meanings. To keep the bold effect of the original Hebrew word was a must, partly because it was a signature, which is normally just a name, and also partly because a typically pretentious as well as mysterious element of the woman's style was never to be lost.

My answer was somewhat similar to the English version but a lot inferior due to a characteristic nature of the Japanese language. Consequently, the symbolic significance of this protagonist's signature was half, if not entirely, lost to my great agony and dissatisfaction. You feel, in such a case, powerless and useless de-

spite the fact that your failure is not entirely caused by your incompetence. It is, perhaps, a typical case when a translator feels his/her fate – a fate of being trapped between two languages and consequently between two cultures where there is no way out.

The next example is the case of a clash of two cultures. It involves a translation of a passage from the Bible quoted by one of the characters in *Black Box*. The English translation of the passage is quite faithful to the original: "*Is Ephraim my dear son? is he a pleasant child? for since I spoke against him, I do earnestly remember him still: therefore my bowels are troubled for him*" (Jeremiah, chapter 31, verse 20. *My bold*). Though I am fully aware that authority translations of the Bible rouse fierce debates in any country, I just want to touch upon this passage as a case in point. The Japanese translation for those words *in bold* did not convince me because the translated words are totally devoid of the important nuances and the typically strong way of expressing human emotions in the cultural environment where the Bible, meaning here the Old Testament, was written.

If 'my bowels' ('*mevi*' in Hebrew which literally means intestine) are translated into 'my mind', it no doubt loses the physicalness, the stark realism, which is an essential characteristic of the style of the Bible. This loss seriously weakens the effect of this quotation by the character at this point, were I to use here the authorized Japanese translation of the Bible. The character worries, or pretends to worry, about his stepson, expressing his feelings by quoting this passage. His worries are so fierce that he feels, as it were, as if his guts are wrenched.

Here comes the usual dilemma of a translator: should the original be respected or should it be 'neutralized' or 'localized' so as to make it

sound more natural in accordance with the nature of the translated language in its cultural settings?

My decision in this instance, and in most instances, is the former. Too much localization, sacrificing the characteristics of the original and valuing the readability as well as naturalness of the translated text, does ruin the whole thing. The gut-wrenching, coarse, brutally powerful aspect of the original Hebrew language are as far as I can see, the core around which characters and stories are formed. If you omit or ignore this fact, the outcome will be something like a stuffed creature, without flesh, blood, smells, voices, the sound of breathing and the sound of heart beat – all of which comprise the life of a literary work. Efforts to retain them as much as possible, I believe, is the way not to betray the author.

How about, you may wonder, the readability of the translated text? This is again a question to which we can hardly expect a simple, clear-cut answer. The principal duty of the translator, beyond question, is to make the translated text readable to the extent that it does not sound like a translation. This, however, does not mean that the translator has as much leeway as crossing out a couple of lines from the original text as Hillel Halkin did. The process of translation is a battlefield of two clashing cultures: the more the two cultures are far apart, the fiercer the battle is. When you try too hard to remain faithful to

the original, you sacrifice the readability of the translated text. But, on the other hand, when you give the first priority to the readability, you are bound to sacrifice the essential quality of the original. After all, I must admit, there is no ready-made answer to this question.

No matter how scientifically and systematically an analysis may be conducted on the process of artistic creation, the time will never come and should never come when all the complex workings of human emotions and creative faculties are thoroughly exposed and explained. The same applies to the process of translation. In the final event, whether a translation is good or not depends solely on the translator's sense of balance. Translators who are trapped between two languages and two cultures are, no doubt, bound to encounter the same problems all over again in each book they deal with. So long as we go through this battle with acute consciousness each time, not falling into a habit of mechanical treatment of the problems, we will have a chance of performing a good job.

We must, however, bear in mind that translation is possible in a spiritual community between the original text (author/poet) and the translator. The communication therein is sometimes tense and sometimes elevating: it is never static. Every moment is a testing ground for the translator. Every moment can be either an agony or a bliss.

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