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Inga-Stina Ewbank

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# 'Open to Encounters': Some Thoughts on Translation as Criticism and Creation

## **Abstract**

In the family of literary activities, translation used to be seen as a stepchild, doomed to be looked down on as being derivative rather than original. From a consciousness of belonging 'below' — in the words of Donald Frame, himself a distinguished translator of Montaigne's complete works — translators have written of the lack of recognition of the nature and demands of their work, and of the thanklessness of doing hard work for which the best praise is 'transparent' — not the ideal colour for the spur of fame.

INGA-STINA EWBANK

## ‘Open to Encounters’: Some Thoughts on Translation as Criticism and Creation

Clearly it belongs far below good literary creation, and below good literary analysis, but I think it demands much of the same sensitivity as both of these. (Frame 70)

In the family of literary activities, translation used to be seen as a stepchild, doomed to be looked down on as being derivative rather than original. From a consciousness of belonging ‘below’ — in the words of Donald Frame, himself a distinguished translator of Montaigne’s complete works — translators have written of the lack of recognition of the nature and demands of their work, and of the thanklessness of doing hard work for which the best praise is ‘transparent’ — not the ideal colour for the spur of fame.

Happily in recent decades there has been a change, a re-shuffling and re-valuation of literary family relationships, brought about by several, at least partly interrelated, phenomena. Translation studies have become an academic discipline with a rich critical and theoretical literature of its own, examining the nature and conditions of the translator’s work in its full socio-political and intellectual as well as linguistic context. At the same time the idea of translation has come to be central in postcolonial thinking about permeable — or impermeable — borders, geographical, cultural and linguistic. In a discourse both critical and creative, translation can figure as a key concept in exploring otherness, exile, even belongingness. To cite just two outstanding examples, Salman Rushdie can describe himself as ‘a translated man’ (Rushdie 1991 15), and Shirley Chew subtly analyses the activity of translation in the negotiations between past and present, and between parts of the map, in V.S. Naipaul’s *The Enigma of Arrival* (Chew 137–55). I have been privileged to be a colleague of Shirley’s at Leeds and so to follow this discourse as it were from the sidelines while pursuing my own work on other and older literature in English, but also on translating Ibsen and Strindberg plays into English. This paper is an attempt to organise the thoughts resulting from that experience: from practising interlingual translation in a still relatively new climate where it is natural to think of literary translation as an activity in which the critical and the creative co-exist, collaborate and interpenetrate, until they are virtually inseparable.

Translating works from two northern European, uncolonialising and uncolonialised nations whose languages, thanks to Viking and Anglo-Saxon invasions of the British Isles, have quite strong family relations with English — this may seem, both culturally and linguistically, to be a walk-over compared, for example, with the 'transcreation' (Mukherjee 85–93) practised in the Indian subcontinent, between its many indigenous languages and between each of these and English. Yet in my case, too, the difference, the gap to be bridged, is real, and many of the issues raised are of general application. Ambitious and radical writers in nineteenth-century Scandinavia could be cripplingly conscious of belonging to a marginalised culture. 'Isn't it disastrous to be buried alive as we now are with three dead languages and two and a half royal houses', Strindberg wrote from Paris in 1885 (Robinson I 186); and both he and Ibsen spent much (in Ibsen's case most) of their creative lives in voluntary exile in France or Italy or Germany. For all his desire to reach an international audience, Ibsen remained staunchly monoglot (Dano-Norwegian), but Strindberg could find a creative stimulus in abandoning Swedish for French: 'My brain crackles when it has to give birth to the right word in the foreign language, but this exertion produces a full vision of what I have experienced' (Strindberg VI 389). But despite the crackle he never truly changed languages, unlike Karen Blixen/Isak Dinesen for whom the foreign language of English was an essential part of the creative process. And English *is* a foreign language to Scandinavians, with expressive possibilities quite different from those of their own (closely related) languages. From a position of Swedish-English bilingualism acquired only in my twenties, I never stop being amazed at how soft and pliable English feels: how the vast polyglot vocabulary urges one to pursue nuances of meaning; how the malleable grammar encourages syntactic adventurousness. In contrast the Scandinavian languages feel hard and unyielding: a smaller and more exclusively Germanic vocabulary, a far more restricting grammar. If I dare generalise, the genius of the Scandinavian languages tends towards the larger-featured, more blatant rendering of extreme states of mind, while English is the more helpful medium for the intricacies and complexities of human relationships.

My point in dwelling on perceived differences is one made more forcefully by the great German Shakespeare translator, A.W. Schlegel, when he referred to translation as a task 'in which one is continuously tormented by the sense of ineluctable imperfections' (Atkinson 4): 'ineluctable' because no language system metamorphoses immediately into another (as the young Jude the Obscure finds out when at last he gets his coveted Latin and Greek grammars), and because the linguistic process of translating is itself a cultural one. The negotiation with another language involves so much more than finding lexical equivalents for the words of the original text. There may not even *be* such equivalents. Japanese translators of Shakespeare struggle, they tell us, to find substitutes for 'to be' in Hamlet's 'To be, or not to be', and — since their language has no habit of profanity

and no oaths rooted in the religious sense of taboos — for ‘zounds’ in Othello’s imaginings of Iago lying with and on Desdemona. As a result an English person who knows Japanese would find the (translated) line more like Nick Hornby than Shakespeare: ‘Lie with her? Shit, that’s fulsome!’. And then again words are not neutral counters but culturally conditioned and laden with associations, so that since the Second World War German Shakespeare translators find it difficult to translate ‘leader’ in the Histories as ‘Führer’ and ‘All hail, Macbeth!’ as ‘Heil!’. Eva Hoffman puts her finger on the point: ‘You can’t transport human meanings whole from one culture to another any more than you can transliterate a text’ (Hoffman 1998 175). Her *Lost in Translation* (1989) gives a wonderfully poignant insight into what it means to live uprooted and therefore in a language where ‘the signifier has become severed from the signified’ (106).

So, aware of ineluctable imperfections in the very concept of translation, the interlingual translator faces a dilemma: do I aim for semantic accuracy or for what sounds plausible in the language into which I am translating, for ‘good English’? Do I want a translation that aims at faithfulness to the original or at an effective cultural translation? Ibsen makes a strength out of the smallness of his given vocabulary; his characters signify their obsessions by hammering away at one and the same word: do I, as a translator, fear flatness and draw on the English thesaurus of synonyms? Strindberg shuns nuances and makes his people speak the unspeakable; his men and women pull each others’ guts out with words: do I normalise his dialogue? If one believes (as I do) that a cultural translation does not have to mean normalisation, this raises the challenge of retaining in the text an alienness which will not alienate but enlighten the reader or audience. I was never so pleased as when, without of course mentioning my translation, a reviewer of Katie Mitchell’s RSC production of Strindberg’s *Easter* praised Lucy Whybrow’s Eleonora for convincing him ‘that this is how a girl might turn out if she’d been wrongly dumped in an asylum with only the Bible for company’ (Taylor 1992). I had read Walter Benjamin’s essay, ‘The Task of the Translator’, and taken from this dense and often difficult, not to say self-contradictory, document what I most needed, which was two sentences: ‘The task of the translator consists in finding that intended effect [*Intention*] upon the language into which he is translating which produces in it an echo of the original’ (Benjamin 76), and ‘it is not the highest praise of a translation ... to say that it reads as if it had originally been written in that language’ (Benjamin 79).

But what if I had been translating *Easter* into a language and for a culture where young women don’t read bibles and celebrate Easter? This brings up another dilemma, which undercuts any comfortable solution to the first. If the first is made up of questions of how to stay faithful to an original while communicating with a readership or audience in another language, the second involves a questioning of the value of faithfulness as such and of the status of any original — a questioning that has lately been rife in post-structuralist

Shakespeare studies, which here find common ground with postcolonial studies. Both disciplines clearly meet in explorations of Shakespeare as an icon of the high culture associated with British imperial expansion; but what I am concerned with here is a stated desire to delete from our critical language any reference to Shakespeare (i.e. his texts) as an authority and instead to inscribe 'Shakespeare' as a number of historically specific versions and performances. In this reading, native speakers of English are said to be at a disadvantage in that '[t]he Shakespearean text continues to exert a tyranny' over them, whereas '[t]he very act of translation subverts the authority of Shakespeare's text' (Bulman 7). To anyone who has struggled in 'the very act of translation' this is likely to seem so far from the truth of one's experience as to be an anathema. Can practice and theory be reconciled?

Walter Benjamin again comes to the rescue. Other, far more distinguished, readers have, like me, taken from the essay on 'The Task of the Translator' what they wanted. Poststructuralist thinkers like Derrida and de Man use it to explode the binary opposition between 'original' and 'translation' (Venuti 6). If any 'original' text is itself a translation, a deferred, or incomplete, process of finding a signifier for the signified, then, according to Derrida (translated), '[t]he translation will truly be a moment in the growth of the original, which will complete itself *in enlarging itself*' (Derrida 188). I find this a far more creative notion than the belligerent and needlessly politicised idea of the translation subverting, by definition, the original; it allows for respect *both* for the 'original' as the best the author of it could do (and, hopefully, for most of the authors one translates this is pretty good), *and* for the translation as a privileged and joyful sharing in the growth of that original.

If this is at worst a naïve and at best an eclectic position, it does take the horns out of the second dilemma, enabling one to remain at heart an essentialist believing in the value of faithfulness to the original even as one (a) recognises that any translation ineluctably involves a greater or lesser element of adaptation and (b) welcomes serious 'transcreation' in the sense defined in the 1996 edition of the *Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary* as 'creative translation seen as producing a new version of the original work' (Mukherjee 85).

Though the use of the term seems limited to the Indian context, recent literature from literally every continent is rich in accounts of such transcreations, where works in one language and from one culture acquires new historical/cultural and often political specificity in another. Within my own specific interests, this applies of course particularly to Shakespeare, but Ibsen is also a case in point. *An Enemy of the People* becomes in Satyajit Ray's film (1989) a beautiful piece of didacticism with an almost utopian upbeat ending. *Ghosts* in a multiple translation — into Bangla from an English translation of the Norwegian original, and into a Bangladeshi Muslim society from its original Norwegian Protestant setting — was performed in 1996 by the Centre for Asian Theatre, under the

title of *Krishnabibar*, meaning ‘black chamber, or hole’. The title alludes, the director explains, to the thematic centre of the play, since the Norwegian title, *Gengangere* (the dead who reappear), has no meaning in a faith with no concept of reappearance after death, and the English title is misleading, ‘because “ghosts” only has the meaning of devils’ (Nilu 121). Ibsen himself would no doubt have thought this a creative translation, since women, who made up the majority of the audience as the production toured the country, recognised the problems of family life and religious oppression; and since the more liberal press hailed it ‘as an example of how theatre can be used to change society and socio-cultural values’, while a fundamentalist newspaper demanded that it be banned (Nilu 124).

Transcreations such as *Krishnabibar* testify to the power of a great text to be a generative source, not primarily providing a verbal language to be translated but a means of holding a mirror up to a particular cultural situation. Drama, where the translator-adaptor often also works with a director, can inevitably offer the most striking examples of creative translation. But this should not obscure the essence of the creative demand made on any translator in any genre, the demand that, again, I can best define by quoting Eva Hoffman:

I have to find a way to lose my alienation without losing my self. But how does one bend toward another culture without falling over, how does one strike an elastic balance between rigidity and self-effacement? How does one stop reading the exterior signs of a foreign tribe and step into the inwardness, the viscera of their meanings? (Hoffman 209)

Bending without falling over, striking an elastic balance — this, I think, is a translation into body language of what Donald Frame says in the lines quoted at the head of this paper, about much the same demands of ‘sensitivity’ being made of the translator as of both the creator and the critic of literature. Translation is an act of reading as well as writing: of reading the text as closely *and* contextually as only the ideal critic would and then, when creating a new text, *not* (as the critic would) writing your own interpretation into it but using your critical intelligence to find the ‘balance between rigidity and self-effacement’. And in a world of easy encounters with ‘foreign tribe[s]’ offered by global travel and mass communication, the real test is whether the translator, as reader and writer, is able to ‘step into the inwardness, the viscera’ of the two ‘tribes’ between whom he or she is the communicator. Frame defines that ability as ‘sensitivity’, which can be a slippery word. To hold on to it, I finally reach for two recent novels, neither of which claims to be about translation, but both of which seem to me to illuminate the ‘sensitivity’ needed by the translator.

In the modern Bombay of Rohinton Mistry’s *Family Matters* (2002) cultures and languages translate, or fail to translate, into each other. Yezad Chenoy shares a nostalgia for Bombay as it once was with his boss, Mr Kapur, who articulates it through Shakespearean quotations. Mr Kapur is bizarrely knifed to death by

extremists while wearing his Santa Claus outfit; and Yezad eventually retreats into Zarathustri fundamentalism, with a deadening effect on family life. These translations go wrong, but at the centre of the novel's world is the interchange of languages and cultures between the boy Jehangir, Yezad's son, and his grandfather, once a Parsi Professor of English and now slowly dying of Parkinson's, bed-bound on the sofa in the family's overcrowded flat, among the odours and sheer physical problems of bed-pan and 'soo soo' bottle. Jehangir is a sensitive translator. At the end of the novel, now aged fifteen, he has discarded his nine-year-old self's desire to be like Enid Blyton's 'topping' 'Famous Five' (Mistry 2002 110) and learned to live in a world 'much more complicated and painful' (486), but a world which also accommodates the past of his much-loved Grandpa, 'the words he taught me, the stories he told me, to describe and understand the world' (486). He is finding a balance, in Eva Hoffman's words, 'between rigidity and self-effacement'.

Julie Summers, the heroine of Nadine Gordimer's *The Pickup* (2001), is a product of the new South Africa, while living, as the novel opens, in a half-hearted rejection of its moneyed middle-class life style. Her own world centres on The Table — the miscellaneous circle of friends who meet at the EL-AY café, 'her elective siblings who have distanced themselves from the ways of the past' (Gordimer 2002 23). Endlessly talking, they *think* they are 'open to encounters' (10) and have 'solutions for everything that happens to any one of them' (88). But when Julie falls in love with an Arab working illicitly as a garage mechanic, and when he is facing an implacable deportation order, she waits in vain 'for answers that do not come' — except from '[t]heir old hanger-on', a poet, who scribbles on a bit of paper some lines from a poem by William Plomer: 'Let us go to another country / Not yours or mine / And start again. [...]' (88). So she goes with her lover to the poor village, in a nameless desert country, which is his home. To start with, it is not her country, nor is it ever his: his whole endeavour is to find a capitalist country that will receive him as an economic migrant. But when he finally obtains entry permits to the USA, she has to tell him 'I am staying here'. Her country is now the desert and the family of women to whose culture she has almost imperceptibly drawn closer and closer. This bare outline gives no idea of the delicate inwardness with which Nadine Gordimer conveys to us Julie's growth and development, from being a 'sibling' of the Table crowd with its facile 'reading [of] the exterior signs of a foreign tribe', to an identification with the desert and its life. My point is, however, that Julie goes through a process of translation; that the essence of this translation is sensitivity, in the author and in the heroine; and that Julie's translation is a matter of 'step[ping] into the inwardness, the viscera' of another 'tribe' (Hoffman 209).

Neither Jehangir nor Julie face, at the end of their respective novels, an uncomplicated future. But in no sense are they stepchildren, nor is any translator as long as he or she is 'open to encounters'.

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