

Translator Subjectivity and the Process of Translation: The View of a Working Translator

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ABSTRACT

A step-by-step, detailed examination of the actual process of translating a short literary text revealed that the translator's subjective thoughts and feelings only entered the process at the beginning—the choice of text. For this experiment, the translator chose the most odious text he could find, by an author he detested. Yet these feelings did not enter the translation process, as far as he could tell. He concludes that literary translators concentrate on language (and thus the culture that produced it), denotative and connotative meanings, and their subjectivity enters into the process less than one might think. Above all, the translator strives to produce an effect on the reader of the target language as close as possible to the effect produced by the text on the reader of the source language.

KEYWORDS: literary translation, French occupation literature, translation process, subjectivity, position of translator

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I. Caveat Lector

The reader is forewarned. This is not a theoretical article on subjectivity in translation, but an honest account—sometimes painfully honest—of how a working translator, the author of this essay, approached one short paragraph in French and rendered it into English. At each step of the way, he will reflect on what this experience may tell us about the process of literary translation. But there will be no references to Susan Bassnett, Andre Lefevere, Katharina Reiss, Henri Meschonnic, Homi Bhabha or Lawrence Venuti. Working translators rarely if ever use translation theory when they translate. If they are academics, they may verse themselves in it and publish. It is thought, with some reason, that a book on translation theory is more helpful in securing promotion or tenure than a translated novel or a collection of translated poems. In actual fact, translation theorists who are also literary translators are rare indeed.

Moreover, I am not at all sure to what extent my “subjectivity” entered into the process I shall describe, except in the choice of text. My reason for choosing the text I will consider here, however, is an extremely unusual instance of that particular use of the translator’s subjectivity.

II. Preliminary

The circumstances that led me to translate the text in question were special. They are worth recounting, since it is a text I normally would not have considered translating and the choice of text is ideally subjective. It is really quite simple: what do I want to translate? (More on this, below.)

In 2017, I was invited to participate in a panel at the yearly conference of ALTA, the American Literary Translators Association, on “Translating the Taboo.” From the way the subject of the panel was framed, it was clear that most participants would discuss how they wrestled with themselves, their conscience, and their culture when translating passages they found offensive for one reason or another. Perhaps they should tone them down or even omit them. I strongly believe translators have an ethical responsibility to translate the text in front of them, period. I thought about the panel and agreed to participate if the moderator would allow a contrarian view. She did. The title of my talk was “Why Translating ‘The Taboo’ Just Means Translating.” Sure enough, other participants questioned how “the positionality of the translator” affected

her or his translation. Since it is almost impossible to live off literary translation, the overwhelming majority of ALTA members are academics and the three additional syllables in “positionality” give academic creds to the lowly word “position”; so “positionality” is much in vogue. Otherwise, I see no difference in the two nouns: the translators talked about how being a white American male professor or a Latina grad student affected their practice of translation—in other words, the role of their position in relation to the text. Or, to put it another way, how their subjectivity, shaped by their position in society and their moral code, affected their translation of the text.

I do not think good literary translation really depends on our position or political views, but rather on understanding the complexities, nuances and resonances of the source language in depth. Literary translators must have a deep knowledge of the culture that produced the work, too. We must know its literature, of course, but we must also know how people of various social classes and regions talk, what words they use and how they use them. I do not consider the translator’s “subjectivity,” as it is usually defined, to be important. The expressive subject who reveals his or her personality is the author, not the translator. What counts in literary translation is one’s feel for the source language. And, although translators rarely talk about this, for the target language, too: no matter how well you know Korean, you cannot do a good translation of an elegant passage in that language unless you can write elegantly in the target language, which is usually your own.

A “feel” for the language, an “elegant” passage—these are certainly vague terms, but we are dealing with the translation of literature here, not with the translation of a treatise on particle physics. Literature does not communicate information as scientific writing does. What literature communicates to the reader is subtle and complex, even when the text seems to have a fairly simple message; the “what” cannot be precisely described, although critics and theorists may try. The same is true of the process of translation.

Given these core beliefs, I decided to demonstrate their validity by taking a text as alien as possible to my position, a text I subjectively considered odious, and translating it well, or at least as well as I could.

I think this is the exact opposite of how literary translators choose works to translate. I know it is for me. I began translating because I had an intense admiration for the French poet Henri Michaux and I wanted to show my friends, and by extension any Anglophone who did not know French, how great he was.

Only a small part of his work had been translated at the time and I thought the published translations did not convey his power, wit and strangeness very well. So I put together the rudiments of an anthology, shopped my samples around and was lucky enough to get a publisher to take on the project. Similarly, when I was teaching a class on Modernism years later, I wanted my class to see how wild and funny Alfred Jarry's *Ubu roi* was, and I did not think the extant translations did that at all. So I translated it myself: *Ubu the King*. (It was fun!) That's why my frequent collaborator Nicole Ball and I translated Laurent Mauvignier's magnificent novel *Des hommes (The Wound)*¹ and Abdourahman A. Waberi's *Transit and Passage des larmes (Passage of Tears)*, for example. Ideally, literary translators do their poorly paid work because they love the foreign original and want to see it circulate, in all its glory, through their own culture. The choice to translate is a subjective one.

Even here, however, external factors sometimes intervene that have nothing to do with one's subjectivity. A publisher for whom you have translated one work asks you to do another and you don't want to lose the publisher, so you do it, even if you do not particularly like the work in question. Or a writer becomes a friend, produces something you do not think is very good, but you find it impossible to refuse to translate it. And literary translation is enjoyable work, even when no one would call the text you are translating great literature: the process of translation is partly like solving a puzzle; it is always challenging, always interesting.

III. Background

I picked a passage by Lucien Rebatet that I knew from my research into writing during the Nazi Occupation of France (1940-44). The paragraph has been anthologized as a perfect example of the kind of thing that caused some collaborationist writers, though hardly all, to be put on trial after the liberation

¹ Our title, which seems like a mistranslation, needs some explaining. Titles are often adaptations more than translations, as what works as a title in one language sometimes does not, in another. Thus the English *Wuthering Heights* is, memorably, *Les Hauts du Hurlevent* (literally "Windhowl Heights") in French. *Des hommes* is a strange title. A literal translation of *Des hommes*—"Of Men" or "Some Men"—would not give an idea of what the novel is about and would simply be terrible titles. Mauvignier uses a quotation from Jean Genet as an epigraph; it speaks of an "inner wound" where the humiliated man goes to take shelter. After Nicole came up with *The Wound* as the perfect English title for the book, she found that the previously published German translation was, precisely, *Die Wunde*.

of France. Rebatet was an ardent fascist, viscerally anti-Semitic and pro-Nazi. He and his colleagues on a journal called *Je suis partout* (*I Am Everywhere*) denounced Jews and left-wingers and called for their arrest. Which often happened: they were arrested by the Vichy police and deported by the German Occupation forces. In 1942, when the deportation of Jews and Resisters was going strong, Rebatet published a big book called *Les Décombres* (*The Ruins*) about himself, his past as a young fascist, his opinions and above all his hatreds: hatred of Jews, of so-called “communists” (anyone on the Left). He called them bacilli infecting France. Despite its length—669 pages in the original edition—the book was a bestseller. When the Nazis were driven from France in March 1945, he fled to Germany along with other Collaborators. Later in 1945, when the war was over, he was arrested, tried for treason and sentenced to death. Some famous French authors petitioned for him to be pardoned; Albert Camus was one of them. In 1947, his sentence was commuted to life. He was pardoned and released in 1952, but never expressed the slightest regret for what he had written or renounced the views he espoused.

The passage below is a description of Leopoldstadt, the Jewish quarter of Vienna, some time after the Nazis marched into the city. A number of the Jews who had lived in Leopoldstadt before the war are famous: Sigmund Freud, Elias Canetti, Arnold Schoenberg, Lise Meitner (one of the physicists who developed nuclear fission) and Billy Wilder (*Some Like It Hot*, *Sunset Boulevard*, etc.). Just one day after Hitler invaded on March 12, 1938, Jews were driven through the streets of Vienna and many of their homes and shops were looted and “Aryanized,” that is, taken over by non-Jewish owners. During the Kristallnacht pogrom in November 1938 (“Crystal Night” because of all the shattered glass), every synagogue in the city was burned down except one. Most Jewish shops were looted and shut down for good; over 6,000 Jews were arrested and most of them were deported to the concentration camp at Dachau. By 1941, 130,000 Viennese Jews had fled Austria. They had to leave behind everything they owned and pay a fine to get out. In 1942, most of the Jews remaining in Vienna were deported and murdered. Roughly 175,000 Jews lived in Leopoldstadt before the invasion. About 2,000 survived.

I was aware of this in a general way when I translated the text below, although I did not know the exact figures.

Text

J'avais voulu revoir le ghetto de Leopoldstadt. Ses longues rues . . . étaient frappées de désolation. Les rideaux de fer aveuglaient maintenant d'innombrables devantures portant encore des noms baroques, forgés au fond des Karpathes ou de la steppe pour tous les nomades qui avaient campé là. Quelques escouades de « Hitlerjungen » venaient de terminer une petite expédition punitive. Les murs portaient de tous côtés d'énormes barbouillages : « Porc juif » – « Maison juive – Désinfection urgente – Chrétien ! attention ! ». Des juifs s'efforçaient de gratter ces stigmates. D'autres dissimulaient peureusement leurs profils derrière des fenêtres. Je nageais dans une joie vengeresse. Je humais la revanche de ma race. (Rebatet 62)

Translation

I had wanted to see the Leopoldstadt ghetto again. Its long streets . . . were struck with desolation. Iron curtains now blinded countless shop windows still bearing strange names, forged in the depths of the Carpathian Mountains or the steppes—the names of all the nomads who had camped there. A few squads of *Hitlerjungen* had just finished a little punitive expedition. The walls had huge scrawls on all sides: “Jewish Pig—Jewish House—Disinfection Urgent—Christian, watch out!” Some Jews were trying to scrape off these stigmata. Others were fearfully hiding their profiles behind windows. I was bathing in vengeful joy. I was inhaling—savoring—the revenge of my race.

IV. Position, Subjectivity

Now, the translator: I am an American Jew. My wife Nicole was born in Paris and her biological father died in Auschwitz. With the help of a courageous organization, her mother saved her children by sending them away to the country during the Occupation. She herself managed to survive by keeping a low profile in Paris. I am also far to the political left. In other words, everything Rebatet hated summed up in one translator.

And Rebatet represents everything I hate: the above passage is loathsome, utterly devoid of what we rather naively call common humanity. To begin with, it uses a well-known trope of European antisemitism and racism, one that is far from extinct: the Jews in Leopoldstadt are not “really” Austrian, wherever they may have been born, they are “nomads” from the Carpathians or elsewhere.² Above all, the author is exulting in persecution and, as he must have known by the time he wrote this, mass murder. This is the work of a vile man with a certain gift for words. (That this book had been a bestseller during the Occupation speaks volumes about the mentality of thousands of French readers at the time.) But Rebatet is not a great writer like the famously antisemitic Céline, I note in passing: I admire Céline the novelist and find his work exciting; I feel nothing but revulsion for Rebatet. In other words, if my subjectivity were important in translating, I should either have been incapable of translating this passage well (whether I did or not is for the reader to judge) or at the very least, I should have been wrestling with my distaste for the text before me as I worked. After all, as the distinguished American-Nigerian writer Teju Cole says, “[t]ranslation . . . is literary analysis mixed with sympathy” and usually, as we saw in our choices of what to translate, he is quite right. Not here.

V. Process

As far as I can reconstruct my thoughts and feelings as I worked, the following list enumerates the only things I considered when I translated the passage. The rest was more or less automatic. Note that at no time did I think about my position as translator, the lens through which I was seeing it, or my subjective consciousness as it encountered this offensive text. In fact, I did not think about its offensiveness, only of how best to render the text itself. Describing and analyzing the process I went through will illuminate, I hope, how translators actually work as distinguished from how theoreticians think they work. Of course, I am describing how *I* work, but there is no reason to think I am unique.

² It is the same trope used by our former president when he publicly told four Congresswomen of color to “go back to where they came from.” Three of them were born in the United States and all, of course, were citizens. Similarly, before the 1998 World Cup, Jean-Marie Le Pen, founder of the fascistic Front National, called the great French soccer player Zinedine Zidane “An Arab born in Marseille.” He was silent when Zidane scored twice in the final game, winning the trophy for France.

In the third sentence, should I translate *aveuglaient* literally, by “blinded”?

Yes! He’s glad the shop-windows can’t see out anymore, or rather, their owners can’t. Note how here, my own “subjectivity”—assuming this enters the process at all—is obliterated. I am trying to put myself in the place of the author. And committing the new-critical sin of intentionality by asking what the author wanted to do here. To repeat: I am trying to render the author’s subjectivity into English, not the translator’s. In the same sentence, I quickly decided that *baroque* here had nothing to do with a style of music or art, but rather to its extended meaning, fairly common in French. I only consulted a dictionary just now: sure enough, it’s the second meaning of “*baroque*,” when it describes an *idée*: “weird, strange, wild.” So the lexicographers who made Le Robert & Collins confirm my choice. *Tant mieux!*

In the same sentence, should I say the Carpathians or the Carpathian Mountains? I decided to add mountains because my target audience is American and many readers—I was imagining readers, although this was an oral presentation—might wonder where the Carpathians are and even what they are. We translators must not only consider the target language in relation to the source language as we work, we must also consider the target audience and its relation to the text we are producing, too.

And I decided to repeat “the names” for clarity, although the French does not: “countless shop windows still bearing strange names, forged in the depths of the Carpathian Mountains or the steppes—the names of all the nomads who had camped there.” If I didn’t, or if I said “those of all the nomads,” the reader would have to pause to find the antecedent and the sentence would sound a bit stiff to me and it is not stiff in French. Now, “sound a bit stiff to me” is obviously not an objective judgment. It is based on my feel for the target language, English in this case. Still, it is not based on my position as a translator. Nor is it based on my “subjectivity,” as defined in 3a of the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*: “The quality in literature or art which depends on the expression of the personality or individuality of the artist; the individuality of an artist as expressed in his work.” That description fits the author’s text like a glove, but not the translator’s.

Unfortunately, that last analysis is based on a simple mistake. I realized this as I reread my text. Rebatet speaks of “*des noms baroques, forgés au fond des Karpathes ou de la steppe pour tous les nomades qui avaient campé*” and not “*par tous les nomades*.” The names were forged *for* the nomads and given

to them, as in fact often happened to European Jews: the State or the prince or baron would oblige them to bear names that often had unpleasant connotations. Translators should know something about the historical background behind the text. If I didn't, I could not have recognized my mistake and translated "forged for all the nomads," as it would seem very odd. So the translation of the sentence should read "Iron curtains now blinded countless shop windows still bearing strange names, forged in the depths of the Carpathian Mountains or the steppes for all the nomads who had camped there." The second example of my fine considerations about the target audience became irrelevant, instructive though they may be. Another consideration has taken over: the ethical obligation to accuracy. Mistakes—mistranslations—are more common in translations than we like to think. They can occur because of the translator's insufficient attention to detail (like here), or from ignorance, or because of the kind of slip that always mars the most carefully copy-edited book. They usually escape notice. Readers rarely know the source language: otherwise, they would not be reading a translation. Most reviewers don't know the source language either, and if they do, they very rarely take time to check.

The word *attention!* Should I translate "watch out!" or "be careful!" The former sounded closer to the intended tone here.

Here, in this very simple example, as in the short analysis above about "sounding stiff," based as it was on a misreading of the text, we touch on a basic principle of translation. It is practiced by all literary translators even if they do not always say so: we all try to find, in the target language, the best equivalent for the expression we are translating in the source language. The meaning of the word "equivalent" in this context is complex. The idea of a one-to-one equivalent in translation (word X or expression X = word or expression Y) was dismissed as early as Saint Jerome, when he translated the Hebrew Bible into Latin in the fourth century BCE. I would put it this way: *literary translators try to produce an effect on the reader in the target language as close as possible to the effect that the text produces on the reader in the source language.* Of course, "the reader," here, is a construct, imagined by the translator. One hopes the construct is close to reality. That's where our knowledge of the culture that produced the source text comes in. If the text sounds mellifluous to the French reader—and one hopes we know what "the French reader" is like—it should sound mellifluous to the English reader; if it is crude and shocking in French, it should be crude and shocking in English. The practical proof of this is that when

we come upon words or expressions that involve a choice (as distinguished from *le ghetto*, for example, where the choice is made for us) we invariably think: “Now, how would we say this in English?”

Sometimes the question is not “how *would* we say this in English,” which implies a range of choices, but “how *do* we say this in English; what is the word for it?” That’s what happened when I translated *rideaux de fer*: what do we call that metal grating or flexible sheet of metal that is often pulled down over shop windows in Europe and sometimes in America? I remember seeing a man closing a bar in an underground mall (I think it was in Penn Station, New York, shortly after the ALTA conference) and asking him what he called the metal grating he was pulling shut to protect the bar-restaurant inside. To be honest, I have a feeling he did not call it an “iron curtain”—that was my first version—but something else. I did not think “metal grating” was good here, since that would not “blind” the shop windows and the people behind them. Unfortunately, I don’t remember what the bartender did call it, and in these times of Covid, I can’t explore cities to check. The point is, just as translators have to know what words people use in the source language’s culture, we must know what words people use in the culture of the target language—here, its material culture. Note the process: we ask “what is the word for this object?” and not, of course, “how do I feel about this object?” And still less, what is my individual perception or feeling about the object? True, I am speaking here about the translation of a simple object. But a similar process is true for more complex words or situations.

Should I translate *stigmates* as “stigmata” or “scars”? The former may have religious overtones, but also, above all here, an overtone of disgrace. Let’s go with “stigmata.”

Once again, I have just checked a dictionary, this time English-English: “2a. *figurative*. A mark of disgrace or infamy; a sign of severe censure or condemnation, regarded as impressed on a person or thing; a ‘brand’ (“Stigmata”). I’m glad to see the lexicographers of the *Oxford English Dictionary* confirm my choice. But I did not consult the *OED* when I was working, just as I rarely use a dictionary when I write in English. (I checked what it had to say about “subjectivity” to get a clearer sense of what is commonly meant by this vague word.) The point is that here, too, what counted was not my position or individuality or personal feelings but my feel for English. If we can call this a subjective feel for the language, then subjectivity

has entered into the translation process at this point. I am not sure, however, that “subjectivity” is the right word to describe a “feel for the language”: it is an esthetic preference, a sense of what the language does, an “ear” for it, not objective, certainly, but not, I think, an expression of the translator’s subjectivity.

And finally, what gave me the most difficulty, how to render the verb *humér* in the last sentence, the climax of the text? *Humér* describes what you do to breathe in the smoke of a fine cigar, or sniff the *bouquet*, the scent, the “nose” of a fine wine. I asked Nicole and we talked about it. Finally I dared take the step of using two verbs where the French uses only one. No translator would do this if (s)he could avoid it, but I felt that what is conveyed by both English verbs was essential here: the narrator is actually breathing in the air of the desolate ghetto, formerly a thriving neighborhood, and, above all, he is savoring it. Or rather, savoring, still more than a smell or a vapor, an abstract noun. Hence my final version: “I was inhaling—savoring—the revenge of my race.” At the risk of belaboring a point, it is, again, the text’s expression of the author’s subjectivity that is important here, not mine.

Is this the right translation? There are no provably “right” choices in the translation of many words, expressions and lines of verse the way there are right solutions for chess problems, although there are certainly wrong ones—mistranslations. It would be a mistranslation to translate *humait* as “saw,” for example. Arguably, it would also be wrong to translate it simply as “savored,” since one of the values of the French imperfect, signaled by its *-ait* ending, suggests a continuous process, rendered in English by the progressive form ending in *-ing*. And that is certainly what is happening here.

More interestingly, translation often involves *a negotiation between conflicting imperatives*. In the present example, on the one hand, a single verb should not be translated by two, and on the other, both the denotation and connotation of the verb *humér* are important. I chose the second imperative. One could say, I suppose, that this is a subjective choice: that is how I “felt” the text, bringing to it my background as a historically aware reader and my individual consciousness. Again, I think “esthetic preference” would be closer to the truth.

Finally, I note that this kind of negotiation is far more important in translating poetry, especially metered and rhymed poetry. The sound pattern is essential to the poem, but so is the meaning of the words and it is the play

between them, the fusion of sound and meaning, that makes the poem a work of art. In translation, something has to give. Thus Anglophone translators have twisted English into knots as they tried to render the terza rima of Dante's *Commedia* in their own language, since English has so few rhyming words compared to Italian.³ Sometimes a gifted translator can negotiate these demands well enough so that a French sonnet, for example, with its tight rhyme scheme and regular meter, becomes a metrically and esthetically pleasing sonnet in English and still keeps the meaning and some of the beauty of the French. Richard Wilbur in the twentieth century and G.K. Chesterton in the nineteenth have done this for Joachim du Bellay's sonnet "Heureux qui, comme Ulysse," a classic of the sixteenth century French literature.⁴ Poetry is not necessarily lost in translation. Negotiation does not necessarily mean failure.

But all this, I think, has little if anything to do with subjectivity.

VI. Concise Conclusion

The process of translation, as actually practiced by working translators, has less to do with subjectivity than what I imagine most contributors to this issue of *The Wenshan Review of Literature and Culture* might argue. Translation is all about knowledge of language, and thus of culture. Literary translation requires sensitivity to the nuances of both. Does that really depend on the translator's subjectivity?

³ Two extremes are Charles Singleton's prose translation, which comes as close as one can to the literal meaning of the words, and Dorothy Sayers' translation in terza rima. But Singleton loses what makes the work a great poem. Again, its value is not in the information it imparts but in something else entirely, and Sayers not only takes liberties with the meaning but makes the *Divine Comedy* sound like a rollicking work by a mediocre British poet with an interesting imagination. Other translators have negotiated between the extremes in various ways and with various degrees of success.

⁴ The two English versions may be found, along with the French text, in Michael Gilleland's essay "Homecoming."

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