

Translational Spaces: Language, Literatures, Disciplines

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As we move closer to the centennial anniversary of Walter Benjamin's ground-breaking essay, "Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers", or "The Task of the Translator", it is necessary to consider the ways translation studies has changed over the past hundred years, beginning with that oft-cited German modernist essay to scholarship in thousands of languages occurring across the globe today. Apposite, then, was the formation of a conference dedicated to this area of research – to the *translational spaces* created through publication and academia in multiple literary and philological forms – which brought together scholars from five continents to the University of Oxford to address pressing questions about this discipline.

The day-long symposium – hosted at St Anne's College with sponsorship from TORCH – offered six panels of scholarly papers and a concluding keynote reading from the acclaimed translator, poet, and editor, André Naffis-Sahely. It took, at its core, some of the basic tenants of Benjamin's theory concerning the 'central reciprocal relationship between languages' which is bound up in the creative act of producing a translated work (2000 [1923], 17). As Benjamin forces us to confront: what is lost and gained through translation, and how do different languages inevitably interact while also, in these moments of interaction, reveal elements of untranslatability? As Christopher Larkosh has noted, 'in many cases one of the most interesting messages a reader', of a work in translation, 'may find is how the text has been brought to speak in another language, in spite of the difficulties involved in its transmission' (2002, 101). A translated text opens-up a source work to new audiences, increasing readership and intertextual dialogue through a new creative body which accommodates original significations and interpretations. Some of the 'message' of the source text will be lost but, with it, both the fruitful connections and unavoidable limitations between linguistic modes are illuminated, allowing for further study and reader-author interaction across different languages.

Yet, for all the obvious benefits of translation, there are 'difficulties': difficulties in accurately conveying meanings across words from different cultures, some with greater global power than others; difficulties related to which texts institutions deem profitable enough to publish in translation and why; difficulties for the voices of marginalised peoples living outside publishing centres, or of texts composed in non-standardised forms, to be heard, printed, or received by others. It is easier (though not to say always easy) to translate works belonging to the same language family and first published in, say, metropolitan France and Spain, than it is to translate (and, just as crucially, for institutions to fund the translations of) a language like Cypriot Arabic, which has not been fully standardised, into a second endangered language which uses a different orthographic system.

Further, when Benjamin speaks of meanings being 'reciprocal', it is important to bear in mind which exact images are being disseminated and reciprocated across the world. Lisa Nakamura observes, for instance, 'the images of race that arise when the fears, anxieties and desires of privileged Western users... are scripted into a textual/graphical environment that is in constant flux and revision' (2002, 6). Is the field ever and always *democratic*? Are movements between languages equal and fair (economically and in terms of reception), and how do they, like a contagion, spread ethnocentric ideas about culture, race, and gender (within the work or through its paratextual frames)? A text sitting across languages can, as David Wang suggests of *Rose, Rose, I Love You* (1984), a novel originally composed using Mandarin, Japanese, and English, offer a 'rebellion against the monophonic system on which traditional orthodox novels depend' (1990, 53). Equally, translational practices, despite appearing egalitarian in its claims of cross-cultural dialogue, can reiterate monocultural views held by writers, readers, or ideological systems at large.

For these reasons, it was imperative to bring together the voices of around two-dozen thinkers from a range of disciplinary backgrounds currently researching translation across the globe – including Brazil, China, Morocco, Serbia, and the United States – to interrogate these key questions and to attempt to do

so beyond Eurocentric confines. Translational spaces cannot appear on the page before first existing in person, on the ground.

Throughout the day, the panellists explored questions of how translation occurs, why certain texts are translated from one language or marketplace to another, how these concerns tie to political systems, and how all this produces works which deliberately look to the problems of the past as well as the present. On the first issue of how to translate, the fourth panel included a paper by Kotryna Garanasvili on translations of works in dialects such as Scots, Swiss German, and Šiauliai Lithuanian. Alongside, Meri Tek Demir analysed how Armenian and Turkish writings sometimes used the same script during the time of Ottoman rule, and Višnja Krstić evaluated how David Albahari's *Learning Cyrillic* (2012) was translated into English from Cyrillic Serbian, with both versions also including Blackfoot words. For all three papers, ideas of moving between languages and scripts were of equal importance when understanding the stylistic choices translators make. Offering ideas of why certain texts are translated and others not, the third panel included Kuan-Chun Chen's paper on British interests in translating works from the economic power of China, while Susan Yavetz observed how stereotypical views of China based on the "yellow peril" continue to impact which Chinese books are chosen for translation. Meanwhile, Aoife Cantrill analysed Taiwanese writers from 1936 onwards and why censorship forced changes in writing in either Mandarin or Japanese.

These concerns about power similarly featured in the first panel which looked at writing by refugees to show how politics impacts the lives people lead and the languages they use. Bárbara Perez Curiel examined literature from the Latin American diaspora, beginning with *Balún Canán* (1957), bringing attention to the violence inflicted on migrants today which has its roots in the violent colonisation of the Americas centuries before. In similar and distinct ways, Haya Alfarhan analysed Palestinian writing after 1948 with specific attention to Edward Said's *After the Last Sky* (1986), while Beatrice Bottomley evaluated the work of the Palestinian writer Raji Bathish on life during the 2006 Israel-Lebanon war. Both emphasised issues faced by Palestinians in having their literature published while also dealing with conflict around them. The sixth panel also observed this issue of trauma and how translated writers can consider the past and present through the use of two languages or forms. Hanan Natour evaluated the work of a Tunisian author, Wafa Ghorbel, in French and in Arabic which addresses the abuse her focal character faced previously in her life; Georgia Nasseh delivered research on a book written half in French and half in Portuguese by Jean-Christophe Goddard and Takashi Wakamatsu (2017), analysed according to Brazil's colonial past; and Nicola Angeli discussed the Chinese-born author, Dai Sijie, writing in French (2000) before being translated into English (2001) after an unsuccessful attempt to become a filmmaker.

Considering this tension between different time periods, the fifth panel took to rethinking modernism as a movement. Eret Talviste explored how the debut novel of the Estonian writer, Leida Kibuvits, questions gender in Estonia, the Soviet Union, and beyond. Mary Lawton presented research on James Joyce's use of Nordic texts to show his interest in the Scandinavian influence on Ireland, while Yeung Choi Kit analysed the Neo-Perception School (*Shinkankakuba*) to showcase connections across East Asian literatures from China, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan in the 1920s and 1930s. Maintaining this focus on geography, the second panel looked at spaces which encourage multilingualism. Mustapha Ait Kharouach asked questions of how to position multilingual Maghrebi literature, while Amanda Murphy presented a theory influenced by Antoine Berman which seeks to understand how authors like Theresa Hak Kyung Cha and Katalin Molnár write multilingual works. Javier de la Morena Corrales put forward his own theorem which considers how authors make use of translations of their own works, as in the cases of Kate Chopin and Gloria Anzaldúa.

André Naffis-Sahely concluded the day with an outstanding keynote reading on his edited collection, *The Heart of a Stranger: An Anthology of Exile Literature* (Pushkin Press, 2019). This is a work which shines a light on the splendours of translational practices and what they can, and arguably should, be: it invites into one textual home the multitudinous voices of poets from across times and spaces to speak together, in beautiful symphony, on the wonders of the human experience, one which has universal qualities but

which is fundamentally relative to precise individual and local nuances which every translator must respect. The experience of being an exile or a nomad runs throughout this anthology and yet, triumphantly, it is in these pages that the selected writers find a communal home. Exile is a process that seizes one from a sense of original belonging, but it also forces the rise of a new cultural being through being on the move. Likewise, translation involves loss, departure, and dislocation, but it is these acts which enable new creative visions to be formed. Naffis-Sahely demonstrated his passion for translation and the lengths he is willing to go to ensure authenticity, sometimes travelling across continents to work directly with the composers of a given source text or to emerge himself in a culture he is attempting to engage with. This kind of translation-through-exile, however self-imposed, speaks well to the concerns of the literature he is interested in sharing with readers. His lamentation that *The Heart of Stranger* was not broader in its range – he regrets the absence of Polynesian writers in the collection, for instance, and physical restrictions inhibiting inclusion of versions of the poems in their source languages on the *verso* side – also exhibits a dedication to a translational praxis which is inclusive and, to return to that word from earlier, portends to the democratic. He is aware of the limits of translation and publication, including questions of who is welcomed and who is excluded, but this only heightens his devotion to improve the system from the inside.

It struck me that many of the examples of poetry Naffis-Sahely read from featured natural, and even paradisiacal, imagery. Through these motifs, the poets seem to be searching for that edenic place of cultural origin or, even, literary inspiration, while also mediating on how literature (with or without translation) can express identity freely and organically outside (or despite) the mechanisations of market capitalism and the xenophobic infrastructures of post-industrial societies. Valdemar Kalinin's 'And a Romani Set Off' (176-177) engages with the opening chapters of Genesis to explore the origins and statelessness of the Romani peoples and the benefits and limitations of being forced out of Eden and into a world teaming with walls. There is freedom in so-called nomadism, but there is also intense suffering and discrimination. Similarly, 'The Palm Tree' by the emir Abd al Rahman I (37) uses the title image based on one of the Islamic gardens of his capital, Córdoba, to consider his uprooted life. Naffis-Sahely also argued in the opening of his address that the work by Dante which, for him, contains the most honesty is the one representing *paradiso*, not *inferno*. Jewish, Christian, and Muslim ideas – many shared, some distinct – of paradise as a horticultural landscape from which one can attain poetic enlightenment filters into these poems that grieve its absence on our conflict-ridden earth. Kajal Ahmad shows that one of the few freedoms Kurdish people have living without a recognised state is to experience life like birds (183). By contrast, perhaps, Jusuf Naoum's 'As a Dog' (111-112) painfully illustrates how the lives of many Middle Eastern refugees in Germany can be more degrading, due to widespread prejudice and economic inequality, than that of a pampered dog. Even this choice of animal, one domesticated by human intervention for centuries, is important to note. In the twenty-first century, it is necessary to examine how the media mistranslates the lives of refugees, and how societies dehumanise the perspectives of marginalised peoples in their fashionings of nationalism. Other poems in the anthology, such as Michèle Lalonde's 'Speak White' (165-168), depict an earth beyond any hints of the idyllic; one of machines, violence, and racism. It is not surprising, then, Lalonde offers the semi-ironic line: 'Speak white/ it is so lovely to listen to you/ speaking of *Paradise Lost*'.

These ideas can be loosely connected to Benjamin's own analogy: 'Commentary and translation stand in the same relation to the text... the same phenomenon considered from different aspects. On the tree of the sacred text, both are only the eternally rustling leaves; on that of the profane, the seasonally falling fruits' (1996 [1928], 449). Translation and literary criticism allow readers to engage with the dissemination of texts as a natural phenomenon spread via a cultural genealogy like a family tree of words, pages, and voices. It is a 'sacred' process that allows for conversation, not only between individuals, but between the writer – or the reader – and something more spiritual, even divine. At times, though, the fruit of that tree of knowledge falls far from images of cross-cultural harmony. At times, translation alone is not enough to overcome issues of global disparity. Nonetheless, works like *The Heart of a Stranger*, research by the scholars who presented at the conference, and the very existence of the conference itself, are all stepping-stones in the century-long process of grappling with translation studies and ensuring that the right

questions are asked when we consider *the task of the translator* acting within the translational spaces of the twenty-first century.

Translational Spaces: Language, Literatures and Disciplines took place at St Anne's College, University of Oxford, on February 22nd, 2020. It was organised and chaired by Joseph Hankinson, Mariachiara Leteo, Georgia Nasseh, Daniele Nunziata, Eleni Philippou and Yousif M. Qasmiyeh, with funding and sponsorship from OCCT and TORCH.