
BOOK REVIEW

Two Teats of Translation

Lives in Translation: Bilingual Writers on Identity and Creativity

Isabelle de Courtivron (ed.)

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Translation lives!

Translation is alive and well. However, the exclamation mark could as well be about the wonderful stories of texts living in translation, or about people who lived the enterprise of translation.

Naamalingaanushaasana

Among texts, consider Amarasimha's *Naamalingaanushaasana* which has had such a rich life in travel and translation since the 6th-7th century. Its editions and vernacular translations are legion. What is called the Weber Fragment No. 6 is the first large portion of the incomplete manuscript (5 folios of woolly Nepalese paper cut to the format of Indian palm-leaf codices) to survive. It was unearthed by an Afghan merchant in E. Turkmenistan, acquired by a Moravian missionary in Leh, and sold to A.F.R. Hoernle. The text was translated in Tibetan, revised between 1441 and 1528, and, in the 17th century, into Mongolian. Commentaries on the text from Andhra, published later with Telugu explanations, have appeared since the middle of the 12th century, and since then, in Newari, Sinhalese, Malyalam, in Bengal, Maihar and elsewhere, and continue to be published.¹

Like this life in travel and translation of a text, there have been people who lived in travel and translation, and have either

transplanted texts from one language to another, or perhaps even altered the text of history with their life in translation. Among people who lived the enterprise of translation and about whom some information is relatively easily available, consider Xuanzang.

Xuanzang

In the first half of the seventh century, when elsewhere a new religion, a new text, and a new context - which would leave indelible impressions on the linguistic atlas of the world subsequently - were in the throes of creation, Xuanzang was looking for a path into the past, and the authentic texts of an old religion. This Chinese child prodigy was fully ordained as a Buddhist monk at the age of twenty in the year 622. However, he had been deeply confused by myriad contradictions and discrepancies in the texts, and not receiving any solutions from his Chinese masters, Xuanzang decided to go to India and study in the cradle of Buddhism.

An imperial decree by the Emperor Taizong (T'ai-tsung) forbade Xuanzang's proposed visit to India on the grounds of preserving national security. Instead of feeling deterred from his long-standing dream, Xuanzang is said to have experienced a vision that strengthened his resolve. In 629, defying imperial proscription, he secretly set out on his epochal journey to the land of the Buddha.

Xuanzang reports that he travelled by night, hiding during the day, enduring many dangers, and bereft of a guide after being abandoned by his companions. After some time in the Gobi Desert, he arrived in Liangzhou in modern Gansu province, the westernmost extent of the Chinese frontier at that time and the southern terminus of the Silk Road trade route connecting China with Central Asia. Here he spent approximately a month preaching the Buddhist message before being invited to Hami by King Qu Wentai (Ch'u Wen-tai) of Turfan, a pious Buddhist of Chinese extraction.

It soon became apparent to Xuanzang that Qu Wentai, although most hospitable and respectful, planned to detain him for

life in his Court as its ecclesiastical head. In response, Xuanzang undertook a hunger strike until the king relented, extracting from Xuanzang a promise to return and spend three years in the kingdom upon his return.

Traditional sources report that on Xuanzang's return to China after sixteen years, his arrival in Chang'an was greeted with an imperial audience and an offer of an official position (which Xuanzang declined), followed by an assembly of all the Buddhist monks of the capital city, who accepted the manuscripts, relics, and statues brought back by the pilgrim and deposited them in the Temple of Great Happiness. It was in this Temple that Xuanzang devoted the rest of his life to the translation of the Sanskrit works that he had brought back out of the wide west, assisted by a staff of more than twenty translators, all well-versed in the knowledge of Chinese, Sanskrit, and Buddhism itself. Besides translating Buddhist texts and dictating the *Da tang xi yu ji* in 646, Xuanzang also translated the *Dao de jing* (Tao-te Ching) of Laozi (Lao-tzu) into Sanskrit and sent it to India in 647.²

Or consider another case of a life lived in the enterprise of translation nearly a millennium later, one which left its own indelible impression on the future linguistic atlas of the world.

Malinche

Malinche³ was an Amerindian woman who translated for Hernán Cortés and helped him to conquer the Mexicas, more commonly known as the Aztecs. Malinche appears to be an ambiguous figure in both Spanish and Nahuatl (Mexica) accounts of her. The ambiguity about her in these records says a great deal about class and gender in the 1500s.

Hernán Cortés arrived on the Tabasco coast after sailing from Cuba. At first, it appears that he was merely interested in finding gold, but when he learned of the existence of Moctezuma's Empire, he became determined to conquer the whole kingdom. Once

he decided on defeating the Mexicas, he tried to acquire as much information about his enemy as he could. He heard some natives speaking Spanish, and concluded that there must be some Spanish living among them. He made inquiries and found two Spaniards who had survived a recent shipwreck. He sent for them, but only Jerónimo de Aguilar, now dressed as an Indian, appeared. Aguilar, fluent in Mayan, became Cortés's chief interpreter. However, he did not speak Nahuatl, the language of the Mexica. Cortés was, thus, at a loss until some Mayan-speaking Tabasco caciques (Indian Chiefs) gave the Spanish twenty women, including Malinche, who was born in a Nahuatl-speaking region of southern Mexico but who had also learned Mayan as a slave. At first, Cortés spoke to Aguilar, who then translated Spanish into Mayan for Malinche, who in turn would speak to the Mexicas. Malinche, however, quickly learned Spanish and soon replaced Aguilar as Cortés' chief interpreter.

Although she has appeared in both Spanish and Mexican literary accounts of the conquest, Malinche, la lengua, Cortés's translator and mistress has only recently been mentioned in history texts as one of the factors which allowed Cortés to claim victory. In the words of Bernal Díaz del Castillo, a Spaniard who was with Cortés during the conquest, La Malinche "knew the language of Coatzacoalcos, which is that of Mexico [Nahuatl], and she knew the Tabascan language also. This language is common to Tabasco and Yucatan [the Yucatan dialect of Mayan], and Jerónimo de Aguilar spoke it also." As Bernal Díaz explained, "this was the great beginning of our conquests, and thus, praise be to God, all things prospered with us. I have made a point of telling this story, because without [La Malinche] we could not have understood the language of New Spain and Mexico."

La Malinche is an historical figure who aided the Spanish and gave birth to Cortés' son, Martín, sometimes considered to be the first mestizo. But she is far more significant as a symbol for everything, both good and bad, about the conquest: "some call her a traitor, others consider her the foundress of our nationality. . . ."

Reflecting the view of her as a traitor, a variation of her name has become the word for the individual who sells out to the foreigner: *la malinchista*. As the mother of Don Martín, she has been called *La Chingada*, the submissive one or the mother taken by force. Was she a desirable whore or a disgraced mother? Is it possible for the historian to know the truth or is her story the story of many more ordinary women, the story of woman as a powerful cultural symbol which will always remain both more and less than her historical persona?

In the first place, historians cannot establish with any real certainty what her name might have been before she encountered the Spanish. Destined to sleep with the women given to them as presents, the Spanish insisted that they be baptized as Christians. They had Aguilar interpret a sermon which explained Christianity to them, then baptized them. *La lengua*, the translator, was given the Spanish name Marina. At least one linguist has determined that Malintzin was a reasonable Nahuatl pronunciation of Marina in that the Nahuatl speakers replaced the Spanish *r* with an *l*, so that Marina becomes Malina. The Nahuatl speakers then added to that name, an ending which indicates respect: *-tzin*. This ending is similar to the Spanish *Dōna*, which is also used for respect. Just as Bernal Díaz del Castillo called the translator *Dōna Marina*, so Nahuatl speakers called her Malintzin. Similarly, the Spanish had difficulty pronouncing the Nahuatl *-tz*, so changed it to *-ch*, at the same time that they dropped the silent *n* at the end of her name. In this way, one can argue that *la lengua*, the translator, became *Dōna Marina*, Malintzin, and Malinche all at once, ironically through a series of mistranslations or mispronunciations. There is little evidence that the Spanish either knew or cared what name her parents had given her. Interestingly, she sometimes appears in Indian accounts as *La Malinche*, while Cortés was often called *El Malinche* after her.

On the basis of letters from her children found in Spanish archives, it appears that she died some time between 1551 and 1552.

Almost nothing else is known about her. Representations of her in subsequent art and literature have made her as real and as controversial as the historical evidence.

In the beginning was thus the life in translation. (Then there was also the life in retranslation.⁴) And now, ***Lives in Translation***, more than half a millennium later. Lives in translation in the post-colonial, 'post-historical' present, not in history. Lives in translation from the inside if you will, not looked at from outside as contained within history.

Lives in Translation

As you read this book you may find yourself readily agreeing that indeed many of today's most well-regarded writers do seem to have suckled at one tit – that of the mother tongue - before arousing sensations in another elsewhere, by the use of the other tongue in the writing of their creative fiction.

This book, of a series of lyrical essays by noted writers, explores the role that bilingualism has played in their creative lives. Personal experiences are like the pixels which make up the larger patterns: the stuff of history, of colonialism for example, or of exile. And the experience of a private emotional expression in uneasy cohabitation with a public formal expression creates the historical chasms among people that languages straddle. In the process some languages become comforting private chambers of the mind, others confining enclosures, while still others may open doors for some people.

However in this attempt of an internationally selected and highly regarded group of writers to examine their creative processes in the book -while they struggle to maintain a coherent sense of self through all those tongues and tits- what seems to get short shrift is history. One feels as if one is looking at pixels without a picture. Thus, while the subtitle of the book is justified, one wonders about

the title, whether the last word on lives in translation is to be found here.

Taken together these reflections do shed light on the creative process, and the complex ways in which languages get mixed up with the forging (pun unintended) of identities, in the “contemporary, globalized world” as the blurb on the jacket puts it. But can lives in translation be lived only in the ‘contemporary, globalized world’ for some reason? Has history ended? What about the globalized world of other times and lives in translation other than the compulsive mass navel gazing of today’s involuted bilingual individuals in the postmodern metropolis?

“The facts of contemporary history are also facts about the success and the failure of individual men and women....Neither the life of the individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both”, said C. Wright Mills⁵. It is “the quality of mind essential to grasp the interplay of man and society, of biography and history, of self and world.... (T)he sociological imagination (which) enables its possessor to understand the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life and the external career of a variety of individuals.”

Living in Translation

What is the experience of these gifted wordsmiths? Anita Desai (“Various Lives”) who had picked up words, languages, customs, costumes, and cuisines from the litter left behind by the tides of history as a magpie might pick up bright objects to line its nest’, finds that the need to bring them into her writing ‘created lingual unease’.

Experience of travel and novelty lend vividness to writing, but you need new language for unfamiliar places and experiences, ‘the old language does not always do.’ At first she flounders. ‘Having plunged off one coast, I had not really arrived on another’.

To make her world comprehensible to readers who did not share her precise inheritance, she finds the key: 'to use transparency so that it would allow the buried languages to appear beneath the glass of my prose.'

To bring out the German (her 'mother tongue') strand in her being, she allows one of her characters Baumgartner, 'this golem', to become her guide. Baumgartner, a German émigré who escapes to India, found that he had to build a new language to suit his conditions. German no longer sufficed, and English was elusive. The language around him he had trouble in recognizing as English; 'it had seemed to him more like the seed of a red hot chilli exploding out of its pod into his face....Languages sprouted around him like tropical foliage and he picked out words from it without knowing if they were English, or Hindi or Bengali- they were simply words he needed.'

After that initial floundering, now she finds her bearing and explores a continent, one where she finds herself a stranger and a native. 'To live in that state one needs to make oneself porous and let languages and impressions flow in and flow through, to become the element in which one floats.'

Assia Djebar ("Writing in the Language of the Other") finds her speech 'doubling and trebling, participating in many cultures' even though she has but one manner of writing: the French one'. However she finds herself using the French language as a veil over her individual self and her woman's body, a veil over her voice. 'A veil neither of dissimulation nor of masking, but of suggestion and ambiguity, a barrier-veil to desires certainly, but also a veil subsuming the desire of men.'

"As if I were trying, entangled in this silk veil symbolically evoked, to pull away from the French language without altogether leaving it! To go around it, then choose to reenter it. To repossess it as a landlady, not as an occupant with hereditary rights." She thus traverses a 'territory of language between two peoples'.

Ariel Dorfman (“The Wandering Bigamists of Language”) speaks of migrants ‘condemned to live a bilingual fate’. Ilan Stavans (“My Love Affair with Spanglish”) like Baumgartner, finds the seeds of another red hot language ‘Ganga Spanglish’ exploding in his face from its pod in Manhattan. José F. A. Oliver (“To Write and Eye Words”) like the other contributors, finds

“Both searching for a tongue,
I and the Other:
He-moon and She-moon. Lunesa Luna Mondin Mond.”

Lives in Translation, written as it is by talented word jugglers living in, between, or on the overlap of two languages, (even if in the perpetual climax of the present so to speak) makes for a delightfully readable exploration of tits and tongues.

Kashyap Mankodi

Central Institute of Indian Languages
Mysore

NOTES

1. Vogel, Claus
A History of Indian Literature --v. 5, fasc. 4
Wiesbaden : Harrassowitz , 1979
ISBN 3447020105
2. Information about Xuanzang based on the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy at <http://www.iep.utm.edu/x/xuanzang.htm#top>
3. See *THE CONQUEST OF MEXICO* at <http://www.historians.org/tl/LessonPlans/ca/Fitch/index.htm>

4. See James St. André *RETRANSLATION AS ARGUMENT: CANON FORMATION, PROFESSIONALIZATION, AND INTERNATIONAL RIVALRY IN 19TH CENTURY SINOLOGICAL TRANSLATION* at <http://www.cadernos.ufsc.br/online/cadernos11/james.pdf>
5. C. Wright Mills *The Sociological Imagination* Oxford University Press, Inc., 1959; reprint Pelican Books, 1980.

