

TIPS ON TRANSLATING POEMS (INTO OR OUT OF ENGLISH)

1. There have been many studies in the theory and practice of literary translation, including comparative assessments of different methods of such translation and their results. These notes are not concerned with such large questions, but rather with practical aspects for those who are without much previous experience. Comments on approach and technique will apply to literary translation both from a foreign language into English and also from English into a foreign language; they may also be useful for those whose native tongue is not English, who are attempting translation from English into their own native tongue.

2. Literary translation has always been seen as more difficult than the translation of practical texts, such as business documents or instruction booklets for machinery or equipment. The translation of poems has traditionally been seen as even more difficult, and there has always been much dispute about methods that can be used and the kind of result which is the aim of such translation work. It should be pointed out here that in some foreign-language study anthologies the translation of poems is done into prose, so as to concentrate on the meaning rather than the poetical form; but in these notes it is assumed that poetical translation means translation from a foreign poem into some kind of matching or equivalent poetical form in the translated version: from poem into poem. It is this aspect which, more than any other, has made the greatest challenge to the translator and has caused the widest differences of opinion.

3. Literary translators who have had much practice with different kinds of text will have gained through experience their own characteristic way of working. If they have been fortunate they will have received some criticisms and comments from their readers or from teachers or foreign-language experts, and so they will already have some idea of the special relations between the translator and the foreign text, and between the translator and the reader of the translated work. But those who do not have much experience in this way must learn by practice and experiment, to develop the appropriate skills and to make use of their own imagination. The novice translator needs if possible to find a teacher or a skilled linguist to give them practical advice and help, because personal face-to-face discussion is the best way to understand problems and to find ways of dealing with them.

4. Before turning to matters of practical technique it needs to be said that literary translation projects are of many different kinds. Methods to be adopted will accordingly be different; there is no single right way to approach this work, and so these suggestions offered here will need to be adapted, to fit individual circumstances. Different kinds of original text will produce various different problems of historical or contemporary style and structure; and the translator must also try to be clear for whom the translation is intended, what use it is to serve, how much background information the reader may be assumed to have, and whether the reader can be assumed to have some knowledge of poetry and some understanding of what makes it distinctive.

5. What are the basic qualifications that a translator of poems needs to have? First, a close and detailed knowledge of the two languages involved, and of the poetical traditions and conventions in each language. If the texts to be translated are from an earlier historical period rather than recent or contemporary, the translator needs to have knowledge of the historical state of the language at the time of original composition, the different styles and the literary culture of the day. The translator also needs to be sensitive to differences of register in the kinds of language to be recognised in the original texts: whether the mode of composition is formal and classical, or lyrical and song-like, or colloquial and fast-moving like everyday speech, or some hybrid composed of different levels set in contrast or woven together.

6. Second, the translator needs to have read and studied many poems, to have a good experience of poetic composition, so that the translator's mind is 'tuned in' to poetry. It is good if the translator can listen to recordings of foreign poems read aloud by a native-speaker, to understand the sounds and rhythms of different kinds of poems from different historical periods, and the translator should also practice to read aloud foreign poems. If a native foreign-language teacher is available, there can be sessions together with discussion and comment on different styles of reading aloud. There is often a close relation between the formal construction of poems and the composition and performance of songs, which it is also valuable to study.

7. Third, the translator needs sufficient time to concentrate on difficult work, and plenty of patience to bring it to a good conclusion. No single translation can be successful from all points of view, and there is mostly no 'correct' solution to many problems; the translator will have to experiment, and then leave time to make a critical study of first drafts and to revise them after consideration. Polishing a first draft, to improve it in points of detail and in overall effect, is an important part of this work, which should not be rushed. Sometimes it may be possible to invite other scholars or well-qualified friends to read working drafts and to offer comments on them.

8. What preparations should a translator make, to be ready to commence a task of this kind? First, it is of course necessary to select the foreign text or texts to be translated; and it is absolutely essential to be certain that the version of this material should be accurate and authentic. Remember that many anthologies often present texts which an editor has modified, and which also may contain errors or which may omit original features. It is best to find an authorised edition and then to photocopy the material, so as to avoid using an erroneous or corrupted text. Apparently small details like punctuation and indented margins may be quite important for accurate translation work. Some full and detailed editions of collected poems may include very specific explanatory notes, which can be extremely helpful.

9. Second, much reading and study of the original text will be necessary (together with practice in reading aloud), with the use of dictionaries and reference grammars, other reference resources (including also sometimes the internet), and including background information about the author and the different stages of his or her writing career. In this context it will be important to know as far as possible the date or period of composition of the material to be translated, to determine how it fits into the sequence of the author's

development. If the author has produced any comments in prose about attitudes to poetry or the purposes of writing it, or has given literary interviews, or if personal letters on such topics have been published or are available, it will be useful to locate such materials and give them appropriate study. Sometimes in the case of a poet from an earlier historical period there may be published critical studies, with detailed analysis of individual poems or of more general stylistic or thematic features, that can help the translator with unfamiliar problems.

10. Third, establish whether the text to be translated is an independent individual composition or part of a series or linked sequence. Often the first publication of a poem in a collection forming a separate book draws some features from this book-context, so that study of other poems by the same author from the same period will enable features of style and verse-form to be more clearly recognised. If the book publication contains an introduction or preface, this also may be quite helpful. Or the book may have received some contemporary reviews, and if these can be traced they may give an idea of the general literary context at this time. If the author later revised and re-issued the initial versions, study of changes in the text may be instructive.

11. Concerning aspects of formal versification, where original poems have been composed according to strict or semi-strict customary rules, much rather pointless argument has raged back and forth about how a translator should respond to such features. There is absolutely no merit in attempting to carry over by force a specific technical feature from one poetic tradition into another, where such an exact equivalent really doesn't exist. If the formal rules enforce a restriction on some aspect of choice, it may be possible to find not an exact match but a functional equivalent within the literary practice of the translation-language; but very often the effect of a strictly formal imitation is artificial and pedantic and quite contrary to the spirit of the original.

12. Some other technical aspects of the translation task also need to be kept in mind. For example, the language and selection of words in a poem are frequently not usual or standard, in how they 'make sense' and join together; and second, the construction of grammar is also often contrary to normal practice and may sometimes break rules of correctness. Sometimes, in more modern poems, speed of movement condenses or breaks connections; there may be abrupt turns or cuts or slides, or pauses and stops, phrases seeming to float on links of sound or patterns of variation rather than fitting into a clearly recognisable context. Comparisons may often be not at all usual, even within the practice of poetry, so that the reader has to use imagination to respond to them. Poetry is made out of language which is by its very nature not predictable or customary.

13. These non-standard aspects are a challenge to the translator because it is not your task to make the language of your translation more recognisably normal, so that it is clearer to read and understand. If you do this you will break the poem's spirit, and give to the reader a mere paraphrase. You must work hard to retain and transmit the vivid and surprising features of the original poem, by finding ways to be close and true to them, rather than making them smoother and more normal. In older and more traditional poems you may for example find that the sentence word-order has been

altered or inverted; it may not be possible to carry such features directly into your translation, but they should affect the forms of style and sentence-structure which you adopt as you build up your version.

14. Furthermore, it will often be the case that poetic language is very compact and dense, by running swiftly and making rapid connections or jumps or by using words and phrases which compress a great deal into a small space. In order to carry across every element of dense language into a translation, it is often tempting to expand this compactness, to be sure that nothing gets left out. This will make a translation wordy and lax, and it will lose energy, or strength, or delicacy; you will need your most active imagination to respond deeply to the density of your original poem and not to insert extra words into your translated version. In some poems not only the language is dense, but the ideas and patterns of thought and feeling can also be understood at several levels, sometimes at each level making different kinds of sense; one level may qualify another, or make a kind of double aspect, or express divided thoughts and attitudes. Even an apparently simple poem may contain partly hidden interior complexities. By deep reading and exploring, the translator needs to discover these layers and currents within the original poem, as far as possible, because if the translation gives only the surface of the original poem and none of its deeper aspects, then the result will be unsatisfying, and will miss the original's full character.

15. Let us assume that all these preparations have been made, and that the translator now sits down at a desk in order to make a start. Be sure to choose a time and place with no chance of interruption, with all materials and reference works ready to hand. Take up a relaxed but alert position, and clear the mind of restless outside thoughts. Don't attempt this work if you are at all sleepy, or have a demanding task immediately ahead of you. Put the business of the day, and practical worries and thoughts, all to one side. This control of mood is important because you will need to respond to translation challenges by using your own imagination; it is not enough to work at a foreign text without any spirit of your own. It may be good at this time to read over (perhaps, aloud) some fine poems in your own native language, ones that you especially or deeply care for, so that your thoughts may begin to flow and your sense of poetical language may be stimulated.

16. As you begin to read again and examine closely your original foreign poem, concentrate on its inner character and energy and mood and the movement that it makes between its various stages. Allow it to fill your mind. Observe closely the formal features, its use of versification and rhyme and images, its division into parts or stanzas; its internal development of ideas, repetition of features, levels and kinds of vocabulary (choice of words). Remember what you have already studied in your earlier preparation concerning these aspects. Remember that if a modern poem is composed in free-verse form, it will have techniques concerned with line-endings and the relations of sentence-grammar to verse shape, and that normal language forms may be disturbed or broken. Remember that the links between ideas or arguments may be made not by logic or rational connection but by jumps of poetic thought, by images and resemblances in rhythm and sound as much as by regular cause and effect.

17. When you have taken these formal aspects into your mind and can recognise them within the overall complete poem as the elements which make it up, return once again to the poem's inner character. Try to imagine the indirect links and movements which bring the language of the poem into accord with its character, to challenge or disturb or extend its nature through the activities of language and the expressive energy or force which language gives to form and to character. You may not need to have a precisely clear idea of what the poem 'means', because there may be many ideas and kinds of understanding within the shape of a poem, so that a poetic understanding is required to assimilate all these aspects together. For as long as you are still seeing these features, of form and expression and meaning, as separate problems, you are not yet ready to translate. Continue to allow the foreign words to settle into your mind, with their colours and breaks and switches of energy, so that your own thoughts disappear into the poem itself, and its character draws all these different aspects into its own nature. This is the work of a poetic imagination, and the poem will teach you how to do this work in the right way.

18. At this stage you may now take up your pen, and start to make the words of your version. If it is possible you may be able to preserve certain structural features of the original in your own version; or you may have to transpose grammar or sentence-form, or to swap a foreign idiom for a native equivalent; the punctuation and line-endings of the original may give you a strong sense of rhythm and changes of speed or pitch (high or low) in the effect you need to aim for. But in all this work try always to keep the character of the poem, which you recognised before you began, firmly in your mind; because you are translating not a set of words or lines only, but the overall unity and character of this one poem, as a shape in your own imagination. Write everything down in rough draft, but remember that if your version begins to take on its own shape, follow this tendency because this is your best guidance.

19. As this working session is in progress, try to estimate whether you have enough time and energy to complete a first-draft version of the whole piece, or whether it is too long or too dense to manage all in a single attempt. If you can bring the work to some kind of provisional conclusion, write out your best intermediate draft version before you finish off, and keep all your trial sketches in careful order (number the pages). If even the first draft cannot be completed, put into place as much as you have provisionally accomplished, so that your working papers are clear enough for you to recognise and understand when you return to this work. If there is a particular problem which you have not yet been able to solve, it may be useful to write down a brief note to describe and record this problem, ready for when you come back to the same problem next time.

20. At your next work session, follow at the start the procedures already outlined, to choose the right time and place, to have your material and drafts ready to hand, to clear your mind of distracting thoughts. Do not begin to read through your previous drafts until you have taken the original poem and its character fully back into your own imagination; let the poem re-take possession of all your inner ideas and thoughts, so that once again all its features and aspects come into the shape of its overall poetic purpose. Then

you are ready to study again your first drafts, to conclude them if not all of the text has yet been finished, or to resolve any outstanding problems and technical features. You may need several sessions of this kind, until you are satisfied that your best first-draft version of the complete poem is carried through as consistently as you are able to manage at this stage.

21. Then you need to allow an interval to elapse, during which you put the whole project to one side. Forget about it, turn to other work, to allow your draft version to settle down, like a ripening fruit. Don't take a few hasty looks at it, as this will make a good conclusion harder to achieve. Again, carefully choose your time and place for the overall revision session, and again compose your mind, and again bring the original poem fully back into your deep inner thoughts. Then you are ready to approach your draft translation in three different ways: as translation-reader, as the translator, and as reader of the original poem. First as translation-reader take up your draft version and read it carefully and deeply, to discover its own inner character. Does it come into your imagination as a coherent unity, or are there small distracting flaws, in choice of words or linkage of thoughts or images, or in rhythm and connection of sounds? If you find some flaws, now switch from translation-reader to translator and make some trial adjustments. Then switch back to translation-reader again, and test to find out if you have solved the flaws of the earlier draft. When you have polished all aspects of your translation-draft, so that it reads strongly and consistently and naturally (with a good flow and energy), then you are ready for the next stage.

22. Second, after switching between translation-reader and translator, you are ready to switch back to being the reader of the original poem. Assimilate back into your mind its deep character and all its features. Now switch back to translation-reader, this time to check that your translation is faithfully close (as close as can be) to the character of the original. You may have made a well-composed translation which is not quite true to the original, or which misses out an aspect which belongs with the character of the original but which you have not brought successfully into your own version. Once again (as translator), make some trial adjustments, then switch back to translation-reader to check for fluency and good character, and then switch back to original-reader, to check that the character of the original and the translation are in true accord (as close as possible). Several of these switches back and forth may be needed, to make adjustments and then to check on their effects.

23. Now comes a final-stage switch, back to translation-reader. This time the test is to read the draft translation as if it is itself an original poem in the language into which it has been translated. Take this draft poem deep into your reader-mind and allow its full character to shape your thoughts and imagination. Does it have the effect of a true poem in its own energy and coherence; or does it have the unavoidably lifeless effect of what is only a translation? If some features seem not quite natural and fluent in themselves, they will need to be re-worked, by a switch back into translator mode; and then all the previous switches will need to be renewed, until all of these various aspects have been brought into a complete resolution.

24. Here it's important to recognise that no translation work is ever fully completed, and there can never be a best or a right solution. The translator

must consider what the readers of this final version most want and need, how best these wants and needs can be met. If there is an opportunity for an introductory note or commentary, or for some explanations to be added, then the task of the translation itself may be altered. But always remember that the best kind of poetical translation of a poem is another poem, without any didactic extras; and if in all these stages of the translation work the fundamental character of the original poem and of the translation have been strongly understood and brought into a true relation, then the reader of the translation will be rewarded by enjoyment of a good poem which gives a strong experience of its foreign original. This is the ultimate aim of all poetical translation, and it allows the efforts of the translator to bring very real benefit in understanding between cultures. Translation is noble work!

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