

ENCUENTROS



Anonymous Sources *A Talk on Translators and Translation*

Lecture by

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ANONYMOUS SOURCES A TALK ON TRANSLATORS AND TRANSLATION

Eliot Weinberger

Some years ago, Bill Moyers did a PBS series on poetry that was filmed at the Dodge Festival in New Jersey. Octavio Paz and I had given a bilingual reading there, and I knew that we would be included in the first program. The morning of the broadcast, I noticed in the index of that day's *New York Times* that there was a review of the show. This being my national television debut, naturally I wondered if their tv critic had discovered any latent star qualities in my performance, possibly leading to a career change, and I quickly turned to the page. This is what he wrote: "Octavio Paz was accompanied by his translator,"— no name given, of course— "always a problematic necessity."

"Problematic necessity," while not yet a cliché about translation, rather neatly embodies the prevailing view of translation. I'd like to look at both terms, beginning with the one that strikes me as accurate: necessity.

Needless to say, no single one of us can know all the languages of the world, not even all the major languages, and if we

believe— though not all cultures have believed it— that the people who speak other languages have things to say or ways of saying them that we don't know, then translation is an evident necessity. Many of the golden ages of a national literature have been, not at all coincidentally, periods of active and prolific translation. Sanskrit literature goes into Persian which goes into Arabic which turns into the Medieval European courtly love tradition. Indian folk tales are embedded in *The Canterbury Tales*. Shakespeare writes in an Italian form, the sonnet, or in the blank verse invented by the Earl of Surrey for his version of the *Aeneid*; in *The Tempest*, he lifts a whole passage verbatim from Arthur Golding's translation of Ovid. German fiction begins with imitations of the Spanish picaresque and *Robinson Crusoe*. Japanese poetry is first written in Chinese; Latin poetry is first an imitation of the Greek; American poetry in the first half of this century is inextricable from all it translated and learned from classical Chinese, Greek,

Anonymous Sources: A Talk on Translators and Translation was presented at the Inter-American Development Bank in Washington, D.C., on November 9, 2000 as part of the IDB Cultural Center Lectures Program.

and Latin; medieval Provençal and modern French; in the second half of the century, it is inextricable from the poetics of Latin America and Eastern Europe, classical Chinese again, and the oral poetics of Native Americans and other indigenous groups. These examples could, of course, be multiplied endlessly. Conversely, cultures that do not translate stagnate, and end up repeating the same things to themselves: classical Chinese poetry, in its last 800 or so years, being perhaps the best literary example. Or, in a wider cultural sense of translation: the Aztec and Incan empires, which could not translate the sight of some ragged Europeans on horseback into anything human.

But translation is much more than an offering of new trinkets in the literary bazaar. Translation liberates the translation-language. Because a translation will always be read as a translation, as something foreign, it is freed from many of the constraints of the currently accepted norms and conventions in the national literature.

This was most strikingly apparent in China after the revolution in 1949. An important group of modernist poets who had emerged in the 1930s and early 1940s were forbidden to publish and were effectively kept from writing; all the new Chinese poetry had to be in the promoted forms of socialist realism: folkloric ballads and paeans to farm production and boiler-plate factories and heroes of the revolution. (The only exceptions, ironically, or tragically, were the classical poems written by Mao himself.) Yet they could translate foreign poets with the proper political credentials (such as Eluard, Alberti, Lorca, Neruda, Aragon)

even though their work was radically different and not socialist realist at all. When a new generation of poets in the 1970s came to reject socialist realism, their inspiration and models were not the erased and forgotten Chinese modernists—whose poems they didn't know, and had no way of knowing— but rather the foreign poets whom these same modernists had been permitted to translate.

Translation liberates the translation-language, and it is often the case that translation flourishes when the writers feel that their language or society needs liberating. One of the great spurs to translation is a cultural inferiority complex or a national self-loathing. The translation boom in Germany at the turn of the nineteenth century was a response to the self-perceived paucity of German literature; translation became a project of national culture-building; in the words of Herder, “to walk through foreign gardens to pick flowers for my language.” Furthermore, and rather strangely, it was felt that the relative lack of literary associations in the language— particularly in contrast to French— made German the ideal language for translation, and even more, the place where the rest of the world could discover the literature it couldn't otherwise read. Germany, they thought, would become the Central Station of world literature precisely because it had no literature. This proved both true and untrue. German did become the conduit, particularly for Sanskrit and Persian, but it is also became much more. Its simultaneous, and not coincidental, production of a great national literature ended up being the most influential poetry and criticism in the West for the rest of the century. [And perhaps it should be mentioned that, contrary to the

reigning cliché of Orientalism—namely that scholarship follows imperialism—Germany had no economic interests in either India or Persia. England, which did, had no important scholars in those fields after the pioneering Sir William Jones. Throughout the nineteenth century, for example, Sanskrit was taught at Oxford exclusively by Germans.]

In the case of the Chinese poets, their coming-of-age during the Cultural Revolution meant that they had been unable to study foreign languages (or much of anything else) and thus were themselves unable to translate. But to escape from their sense of cultural deficiency, they turned to the translations of the previous generation, and began to discover new ways of writing in Chinese, with the result that Chinese poetry experienced its first truly radical and permanent change in some 1300 years.

Among American poets, there have been two great flowerings of translation. The first, before and after the First World War, was largely the work of expatriates eager to overcome their provinciality and to educate their national literature through the discoveries made in their own self-educations: to make the U.S. as “cultured” as Europe. The second, beginning in the 1950s and exploding in the 1960s, was the result of a deep— and already half-forgotten— anti-Americanism among American intellectuals: first in the more contained bohemian rebellion against the conformist Eisenhower years and the Cold War, and then as part of the wider expression of disgust and despair during the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War. Translation— the journey to the other— was more than a way out of America: the embrace of the other was,

in the 1960s, in its small way, an act of defiance against the government that was murdering Asian others abroad and the social realities that were oppressing minority others at home. Foreign poetry became as much a part of the counter-culture as American Indians, Eastern religions, hallucinatory states: a new way of seeing, a new “us” forming out of everything that had not been “us.”

By the early 1970s, of course, this cultural moment was over, and the poets, for different reasons, became detached from the intellectual and cultural life of the country, as they vanished into the creative writing schools. There are now more American poets and poetry readers than in all the previous eras combined, but almost none of them translate. The few who do, with two or three notable exceptions, are all veterans of the 1960’s translation boom. The end of a general anti-Americanism among American writers and readers may have led to a happy populace of literati, yet it is one that is singularly nationalist (but without overt flag-waving), isolationist (but without overt xenophobia), and uninformed. Unbelievably, or all too believably, the total number of literary translations— fiction, poetry, plays, literary essays, and so on— from all languages, published by all the presses in the United States— large, small, and university— comes to about two hundred a year. The number of poetry translations— including the Greek and Roman classics and inevitable new Neruda and Rilke volumes— is usually around twenty-five or less. The entirety of world literature in English translation may be the only field where it is still possible to keep up with all the new publications in the field.

Paradoxically, the rise of multiculturalism may have been the worst thing to happen to translation. The original multiculturalist critique of the Eurocentrism of the canon and so forth did not lead— as I, for one, hoped it would— to a new internationalism, where Wordsworth would be read alongside Wang Wei, the Greek anthology next to Vidyakara's *Treasury*, Ono no Komachi with H.D. Instead it led to a new form of nationalism, one that was salutary in its inclusion of the previously excluded, but one that limited itself strictly to Americans, albeit hyphenated ones. Today nearly every freshman literature course teaches Chinese-American writers, but no Chinese, Latinos but no Latin Americans. In terms of publishing, if you are a Mexican from the northern side of the Rio Grande, it is not very difficult to get published; if you're from the southern side, it is almost impossible. There are probably less than a dozen living Mexican writers who have been translated and published in the U.S., and only two or three with some regularity. In contrast there are many millions of dollars pouring into Chicano Studies departments, Chicano literary presses, special collections at libraries, literary organizations, prizes, and so on. In terms of Mexican-Americans, this is necessary and healthy, but it has also meant that, in terms of translation, readers in the U.S. now have less contemporary Mexican literature available to them than they did in the 1960s.

Translation is a necessity, for the obvious reason that one's own language has only created, and is creating, a small fraction of the world's most vital books. It is also perhaps the best source for the genuine news from abroad. Mexico, hardly an

obscure corner of the globe from a U.S. perspective, is a case in point:

The American perception of Mexico has radically changed in the last forty years, and the beginning of that change has a precise date. For much of the twentieth century, what we knew in English about Mexico came from the foreign writers who had been inspired, moved, and sometimes repelled by their visits there: Malcolm Lowry, D.H. Lawrence, Aldous Huxley, Katherine Anne Porter, Hart Crane, Graham Greene, and Langston Hughes, among them. Then, in 1959, the *Evergreen Review* published a special issue called "The Eye of Mexico," edited by Ramón Xirau with the assistance of Octavio Paz. This was the first highly visible introduction of Mexican literature in the U.S. and one that was much discussed at the time: the first news of writers such as Paz, Rulfo, Fuentes, Sabines, Poniatowska, Arreola, and others, as well as León-Portilla on the Náhuatl concept of art. We were, at last, hearing from the Mexicans themselves.

That magazine issue led to numerous books in English by these writers and, from that moment on, it was not only Mexico that was inspiring American writers, it was Mexican literature. For the general reading population, Mexico could now be seen through Mexican eyes. What was once a set of stereotypes began— though of course this work is far from complete— to take on a human face.

The same principle is at work south of the border. With the exception of Paz—who was a true internationalist— and a very few others, Mexican writers have tended largely to ignore U.S. literature beyond certain classics, to see it as part and parcel of the monstrous culture that

has brought the world McDonald's and the Marines. This, in the last ten or fifteen years, has begun to change, and many Mexican writers are becoming increasingly interested in that world of U.S. culture that, from the outside, remains hidden in the back streets behind the neon signs of the mass market. It may begin with the translation of a few poems but— as has been historically the case many times— a few cultural artifacts often grow into a more general national understanding. Mexico has gone from a cliched anti-Americanism to the point where its new President-elect is calling for a kind of binational citizenship— a massive cultural change that is not attributable solely to migration and cable tv.

This importing of American literature into Latin America is not part of the Coca-Colaization of the planet; poetry particularly always moves through underground channels that have little to do with the dominant and corporate cultures, and American poetry has always been written in spite of, and not because of, the State and the culture at large. Moreover, unlike Coca Cola— which you either drink or you don't— poetry is a dialogue. To take two examples: The poetry of Octavio Paz was radically altered by his readings of American poetry, particularly Pound and Williams. The translations of Paz's poetry, in turn, were tremendously influential for certain American poets of the 1960's and 1970's. These same poets are now being translated in Mexico and have attracted wide interest. In short, there are now younger Mexican poets who are influenced by the American poets who were influenced by Paz who was influenced by American poetry. Translation is not appropriation, as is sometimes claimed; it

is a form of listening that then changes how you speak.

The second example: In 1913, Ezra Pound, inspired by his discovery of Chinese poetry, writes the manifesto "A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste." Published in *Poetry* magazine that year, it is enthusiastically read by a young Chinese poet named Hu Shih, who is studying in Chicago. Hu returns to China and, in 1917, publishes his own, quite similar, manifesto, "Tentative Proposals for the Improvement of Literature," which becomes known as the "Eight Don'ts," and sets off a literary revolution, the May Fourth Movement of 1919. The story is more complicated, but it may be summarized as this: Hu Shih found in American poetry what Ezra Pound thought he had found in the Chinese. Like the protagonist of a Sufi parable, the poet went to the other side of the world to discover what was at home. Perhaps it is a parable for all translation.

The necessity of translation is evident; so why is it a problem— or, as they now say, problematic? Milan Kundera famously considered the poor translations of himself as— and only a man would write this— a form of rape, and he characterized the bad translations of Kafka as betrayals in a book called *Testaments Betrayed*. All discussions of translation, like nineteenth century potboilers, are obsessed with questions of fidelity and betrayal. But in the case of a writer like Kundera, who came of age in a society dominated by the secret police, "betrayal" carries an especially heavy weight. We know what a translation is supposedly a betrayal of, but is it unfair to ask to whom the text is being betrayed?

And one can never mention the word "translation" without some wit bringing

up— as though for the first time— that tedious Italian pun *traduttore traditore*. Luckily, the Italian-American philosopher Arthur Danto has recently and I hope definitively laid it forever to rest:

Perhaps the Italian sentence betrays something in the cultural unconscious of Italy, which resonates through the political and ecclesiastical life of that country, where betrayal, like a shadow, is the obverse side of trust. It is an Unconscious into which the lessons of Machiavelli are deeply etched. Nobody for whom English is a first language would be tempted to equate translation and treason.

The characterizations of translation as betrayal or treason is based on the impossibility of exact equivalence, which is seen as a failing. It's true: a slice of German pumpernickel is not a Chinese steam bun which is not a French baguette which is not Wonder Bread. But consider a hypothetical line of German poetry— one I hope will never be written, but probably has been: “Her body (or his body) was like a fresh loaf of pumpernickel.” Pumpernickel in the poem is pumpernickel, but it is also more than pumpernickel: it is the image of warmth, nourishment, homeyness. When the cultures are close, it is possible to translate more exactly: say, the German word *pumpernickel* into the American word *pumpernickel*— which, despite appearances, are not the same: each carries its own world of referents. But to translate the line into, say, Chinese, how much would really be lost if it were a steam bun? (I leave aside sound for the moment.) “His body (her

body) was like a fresh steam bun” also has its charm— especially if you like your lover doughy.

It's true that no translation is identical to the original. But no reading of a poem is identical to any other, even when read by the same person. The first encounter with our poetic pumpernickel might be delightful; at a second reading, even five minutes later, it could easily seem ridiculous. Or imagine a fourteen-year-old German boy reading the line in the springtime of young Alpine love; then at age fifty, while serving as the chargé d'affaires in the German consulate in Kuala Lumpur, far from the bakeries of his youth; then at eighty, in a retirement village in the Black Forest, in the nostalgia for dirndelled maidens. Every reading of every poem is a translation into one's own experience and knowledge— whether it is a confirmation, a contradiction, or an expansion. The poem does not exist without this act of translation. The poem must move from reader to reader, reading to reading, in perpetual transformation. The poem dies when it has no place to go.

Translation, above all, means change. In Elizabethan England, one of its meanings was “death”: to be translated from this world to the next. In the Middle Ages *translatio* meant the theft or removal of holy relics from one monastery or church to another. In the year 1087, for example, St. Nicolas appeared in visions to the monks at Myra, near Antioch, where his remains were kept, and told them he wished to be translated. When merchants arrived from the Italian city of Bari and broke open the tomb to steal the remains, Myra and its surroundings were filled with a wonderful fragrance, a sign of the

saint's pleasure. In contrast, when the archdeacon of the Bishop of Turin tried to steal the finger of John the Baptist from the obscure church of Maurienne, the finger struck him dead. (Unlike dead authors, dead saints could maintain control over their translations.) Translation is movement, the twin of metaphor, which means "to move from one place to another." Metaphor makes the familiar strange; translation makes the strange familiar. Translation is change. Even the most concrete and limited form of translation— currency exchange— is in a state of hourly flux.

The only recorded example of translation as replication, not as change, was, not surprisingly, a miracle: Around 250 B.C., 72 translators were summoned to Alexandria to prepare, in 72 days, 72 versions of the Hebrew Bible in Greek. Each one was guided by the Original of all Original Authors and wrote identical translations. 72 translators producing 72 identical texts is an author's— or a book reviewer's— dream and a translator's nightmare.

A work of art is a singularity that remains itself while being subjected to restless change— from translation to translation, from reader to reader. To proclaim the intrinsic worthlessness of translations is to mistake that singularity with its unendingly varying manifestations. A translation is a translation and not a work of art— unless, over the centuries, it takes on its own singularity and becomes a work of art. A work of art is its own subject; the subject of a translation is the original work of art. There is a cliché in the U.S. that the purpose of a poetry translation is to create an excellent new poem in English. This is empirically false: nearly

all the great translations in English would be ludicrous as poems written in English, even poems written in the voice of a *persona*. I have always maintained— and for some reason this is considered controversial— that the purpose of a poetry translation into English is to create an excellent translation in English. That is, a text that will be read and judged *like* a poem, but not *as* a poem.

And yet translations continue to be measured according to a Utopian dream of exact equivalences, and are often dismissed on the basis of a single word, usually by members of foreign language departments, known in the trade as the "translation police." They are the ones who write— to take an actual example— that a certain immensely prolific translator from the German "simply does not know German" because somewhere in the vastness of *Buddenbrooks*, he had translated a "chesterfield" as a "greatcoat." Such examples, as any translator can tell you, are more the rule than the exception. One can only imagine if writers were reviewed in the same way: "the use of the word 'incarnadine' on page 349 proves the utter mediocrity of this book."

This is the old bugbear of "fidelity," which turns reviewers into television evangelists. Now obviously a translation that is replete with semantical errors is probably a bad translation, but fidelity may be the most overrated of a translation's qualities. I once witnessed an interesting experiment: average nine-year-old students at a public school in Rochester, New York, were given a text by Rimbaud and a bilingual dictionary, and asked to translate the poem. Neither they nor their teacher knew a word of French. What they produced were not masterpieces, but they

were generally as accurate as, and occasionally wittier than, any of the existing scholarly versions. In short, up to a point, anyone can translate anything faithfully.

But the point at which they cannot translate is the point where real translations begin to be made. The purpose of, say, a poetry translation is not, as it is usually said, to give the foreign poet a voice in the translation-language. It is to allow the poem to be *heard* in the translation-language, ideally in many of the same ways it is heard in the original language. This means that a translation is a whole work; it is not a series of matching *en face* lines and shouldn't be read as such. It means that the primary task of a translator is not merely to get the dictionary meanings right— which is the easiest part— but rather to invent a new music for the text in the translation-language, one that is mandated by the original. A music that is not a technical replication of the original. (There is nothing worse than translations, for example, that attempt to recreate a foreign meter or rhyme scheme. They're sort of like the way hamburgers look and taste in Bolivia.) A music that is perfectly viable in English, but which— because it is a translation, because it will be read as a translation— is able to evoke another music, and perhaps reproduce some of its effects.

But to do so requires a thorough knowledge of the literature *into which* one is translating. Before modernism, poems, no matter from where, were translated into the prevailing styles and forms: the assumed perfection of the heroic couplet could equally serve Homer, Kalidasa, or the Chinese folk songs of the *Book of Odes*. The great lesson of modernism— first taught by Ezra Pound, but learned, even

now, only by a few— was that the unique form and style of the original must in some manner determine the form and the style of the translation; the poem was not merely to be poured into the familiar molds. Thus, in Pound's famous example, a fragment of Sappho was turned into an English fragment, ellipses and all, and not “restored” or transformed into rhyming pentameters.

This was based on a twofold, and somewhat contradictory, belief: First, that the dead author and his literature were exotic, and therefore the translation should preserve this exoticism and not domesticate it. Second, that the dead author was our contemporary, and his poems— if they were worth reading— were as alive and fresh as anything written yesterday. An unrestored Sappho was “one of us” precisely because she was not one of us: a foreign (in the largest sense) poet pointing to a way that our poems could be written today.

Modernism— at least in English— created extraordinary works in translation because they were written *for* modernism: written to be read in the context of modernist poetry. The cliché that the only good poetry translators are themselves poets is not necessarily true: the only good translators are avid readers of contemporary poetry in the translation-language. All the worst translations are done by experts in the foreign-language who know little or nothing about the poetry alongside which their translations will be read. Foreign-language academics are largely concerned with semantical accuracy, rendering supposedly exact meanings into a frequently colorless or awkward version of the translation-language. They often write as though the

entire twentieth century had not occurred. (This is especially true in the Asian and Middle Eastern languages.) They champion the best-loved poet of Ruthenia, but never realize that he sounds in English like bad Tennyson. Poets (or poetry readers) may be sometimes sloppy in their dictionary-use, but they are preoccupied with what is *different* in the foreign author, that which is not already available among writers in the translation-language, how that difference may be demonstrated, and how the borders of the possible may be expanded. Bad translations provide examples for historical surveys; good translations are always a form of advocacy criticism: here is a writer one ought to be reading and here is the proof.

Translation is an utterly unique genre, but for some reason there is a perennial tendency to explain it by analogy. A translator is like an actor playing a role, a musician performing a score, a messenger who sometimes garbles the message. But translation is such a familiar and intrinsic part of almost any culture that one wonders why there is this need to resort to analogies: we do not say that baking is like playing the violin. One analogy, however, is exact: translators are the geeks of literature.

Translators are invisible people. They are often confused with simultaneous interpreters— even at bilingual poetry readings. According to a survey of my own clippings— which I happen to have, but any translator could tell you the same story— 90% of book reviews never mention the translator’s name, even when they are talking about the author’s so-called style. When they do, the work is usually summed up in a single word: *ex-*

cellent, mediocre, energetic, lackluster. Discussions of the translation longer than one word are nearly always complaints about the translation of a word or two. When my edition of Jorge Luis Borges’s *Selected Non-Fictions* rather weirdly won a major award earlier this year— a prize that is normally never given to a translation or to a dead author— the press releases and news articles did not mention my name, and even my own publisher took out an ad congratulating Borges, wherever he is, but not me.

Translators sometimes feel they share in the glory of their famous authors, rather like the hairdressers of Hollywood stars, but authors tend to find them creepy. As Isaac Bashevis Singer said:

The translator must be a great editor, a psychologist, a judge of human taste; if not, his translation will be a nightmare. But why should a man with such rare qualities become a translator? Why shouldn’t he be a writer himself, or be engaged in a business where diligent work and high intelligence are well paid? A good translator must be both a sage and a fool. And where do you get such strange combinations?

“Why shouldn’t he be a writer himself?” is the great and terrible question that hangs over the head of every translator, and of every author thinking about his translator. One might say that the avoidance of the question— not the response to it— has been the recent flood of publications in which translators explain themselves.

Some translators now claim that they are authors (or something like authors), which strikes me as a Pirandellesque con-

fusion of actor and role (or, closer to our times, a Reaganesque confusion). It began some twenty-five years ago in the U. S. as a tiny microcosm of the larger social currents. Translators began to come out of their isolation and anonymity to form groups, such as the Translation Committee of the PEN American Center, where they could share the tales of misfortune of their underpaid, entirely unrecognized, and often exploited occupation. This led to demands, as a group, for thoroughly justified material concessions: the translator's name prominently featured on the book and in all notices of the book, a share in the author's royalties and subsidiary rights (rather than a flat fee—degradingly known as “work for hire”—with no subsequent rights or income), and some sort of “industry standard” for translation fees. Simultaneous to the slow acceptance of these demands was a proliferation of conferences and lectures on translation as an art. This in turn coincided with the rise of so-called theory in the universities, and there is, perhaps, no subject in literature more suited for theoretical rumination in its current modes than translation: the authority of the author, the transformation of the sign, the tenuousness of signifier and signified, the politics of what is/isn't translated and how it is translated, the separation of text and author, the crossing (or impossibility of crossing) cultural barriers, the relativism of the translation as discourse, the translator as agent of political/cultural hegemony, and so on. All of which are sometimes interesting in themselves, but generally unhelpful when one actually translates. (As Borges said, “When I translate Faulkner, I don't think about the problem of translating Faulkner.”)

With this preoccupation with the translator— and the self-evident and now excessively elaborated corollary that everything is a form of translation— the translator has suddenly become an important person, and explaining translation a minor but comfortable academic career and a source of invitations to conferences in exotic climes. Small wonder, then, that the advance guard of translators and their explainers are now declaring that the translator is an author, that a translated and original text are essentially indistinguishable (because an original text is a translation and/or a translation is an original text) and, most radically, that the sole author of a translation is the translator (who should therefore have 100% of the rights and royalties to the books).

This strikes me as presumptuous, if not hubristic; and it may well be time to raise the banner of the translator's essential and endearing anonymity. In the U.S., we can no longer use the word “craft,” which has been taken over by the so-called creative writing schools, where the “craft” is taught in “workshops.” So let us say that translation is a trade, like cabinet-making or baking or masonry. It is a trade that any amateur can do, but professionals do better. It is a trade that can be learned, and should be (though not necessarily institutionally) in order to practice. It is a trade whose practitioners remain largely unknown to the general public, with the exception of a few workers of genius. It is a trade that is essential to a literate society, and—let's raise a banner— whose workers should be better paid.

For me, the translator's anonymity— his role as the Man Without Qualities standing before the scene, a product of the *zeit-*

geist but not a direct maker of it— is the joy of translation. One is operating strictly on the level of language, attempting to invent similar effects, to capture the essential, without the interference of the otherwise all-consuming ego. It is the greatest education in how to write, as many poets have learned. It is a prison in the sense that everything is said and must now be re-said, including all the author's bad moments— the vagaries, the repetitions, the clichés, the clinkers— while strictly avoiding the temptation to explain or improve. It is a prison, or a kind of nightmare, because one is in a dialogue with another person whom you must concede is always right. But it is also a liberation. It is the only time when one can put words on a page entirely without embarrassment (and embarrassment, it seems to me, is a greatly underrated force in the creation of literature). The introspective bookworm happily becomes the voice of Jack London or Jean Genet; translation is a kind of fantasy life.

In my own case, the other I have bizarrely inhabited— or more exactly, has inhabited me— since I was a teenager is Octavio Paz. But the curious thing is that, in terms of a history of a relationship between an author and a translator, it was not very interesting at all. It was full of discussion, but uniquely entirely without unpleasantness, for Octavio himself was a prolific translator and understood the process, as many writers do not. I would send him drafts of the translations; he would comment on them, often illuminating what had been, for me, obscure. We would sometimes debate back and forth, but in the end, he always gave me the last word, for although he knew English extremely well, he also knew that I

knew it better. A few times, when I was translating poems that had not yet been published in book form, he would change a word or two or a line of the original after seeing the translation— for translation, as another reading, often points out or magnifies flaws in the original. [Or it erases them: At a reading, Octavio once said, “I have many doubts about myself in Spanish, but I love myself in English.” This is a fairly common sentiment: Valéry preferred himself in Spanish, Goethe in Nerval's French, García Márquez in English. It is less a tribute to the translator than a recognition that translation gives a writer a critical distance in which to read himself.] A few times, we jointly came up with an English word that did not correspond to the Spanish original, but rather to his original intent— sometimes because he felt it was inadequately expressed in Spanish or because he wanted to take advantage of the vast and often more precise English vocabulary. And I have invented a few titles that were quite different from the originals, and which I would not have done without the author's participation.

One result of this (for me) lifelong collaboration is that I probably know Paz' work better than anyone. But it is a very specific kind of knowing: I could not necessarily write a critical study of Paz that would be better than any other, for my expertise is entirely microscopic. Rather the way a certain kind of art historian knows a painter— brush strokes, palette, technique— I know all his favorite words, syntactical constructions, punctuation, stylistic tics and gestures; I could spot a forgery a mile away. Yet when asked to talk about Paz' work in general, I may be less articulate than other readers, as I am

a tree surgeon rather than an ecologist.

My personal relationship with Octavio is another story, a subject for the memoirs I hope I forget to write in extreme old age. The author-translator relationship, however, mine or any other, has no story. It is one that has never been told (as far as I know) by any author, beyond a few passing complaints, and only rarely by translators, usually in the form of amusing intertextual anecdotes. This is because the story has only one real character: the author. The translator, as translator, is not a fully-formed human being; the translator, in the familiar analogy, is an actor playing the role of the author. Sometimes we, the audience, are aware of the actor “doing” the role brilliantly or poorly, sometimes we forget he is an actor at all (the “invisibility” that is often still considered the translation ideal, particularly for prose). But in either case, reflections on that role remain one-sided: Olivier may write a memoir of his Hamlet, but Hamlet will never write of his Olivier.

I also happen to be, however inconsequentially, both translator and translated. Because of the nature of what I write, and the technicalities of publishing—abroad I publish in mass-circulation intellectual magazines and cultural supplements of newspapers, which appear frequently, and in the U.S. I appear in literary journals, which are infrequent—it is usually the case that my writing is published first in translation. I pertain, in a small way, to a new kind of writer in this new era of global culture: one who is more visible abroad or in translation than at home or in his original language. To write knowing that one will be translated poses a set of problems that are new for writers (or

more exactly, were previously only known to Goethe and Heine) and are shared not only by these authors-for-translation but also by, among others, the recent generation of African Francophone and Indian Anglophone writers: How much should one sacrifice the domestic in order to reach the foreign? How much can one “explain” to the outside world without alienating the readers of one’s own world? How far can one represent one’s culture—which is, after all, why many translated writers are read—without the often untranslatable local expressions, allusions, terminology, native species? How to remain idiosyncratic in one’s own language—to keep one’s writing from turning into a room at the Holiday Inn, the same in Samarkand or Cleveland? In short, how translatable should one allow oneself to be? These questions are only beginning to be posed, not answered.

The old German Romantic dream of a World Literature beyond nationalisms, of a literature produced by the translated—who have now become the transplanted, diasporic, international—has already had unintended consequences. Among them is the great translation tragedy of our time: the Salman Rushdie case.

It is rarely said that the *fatwa* and its subsequent global mayhem, riots, and deaths were the result of a mistranslation. Rushdie’s book was named after a strange legend in Islamic tradition about the composition of the Qu’ran, which was dictated to Muhammad by Allah Himself through the angel Gabriel. According to the story, Muhammad, having met considerable resistance to his attempt to eliminate all the local gods of Mecca in favor of the One God, recited some verses which admitted three popular goddesses

as symbolic Daughters of Allah. Later he claimed that the verses had been dictated to him by Satan in the voice of Gabriel, and the lines were suppressed. The nineteenth century British Orientalists called these lines the “Satanic verses,” but in Arabic (and its cognate languages) the verses were known as *gharaniq*, “the birds,” after two excised lines about the Meccan goddesses: “These are the exalted birds/ And their intercession is desired indeed.” In Arabic (and similarly in the cognate languages) Rushdie’s title was literally translated as *Al-Ayat ash-Shataniya*, with *shaytan* meaning Satan, and *ayat* meaning specifically the “verses of the Qu’ran.” As the phrase “Satanic verses” is completely unknown in the Muslim world— which Rushdie apparently didn’t know— the title in Arabic implied the ultimate blasphemy: that the entire Qu’ran was composed by Satan. The actual contents of the book were irrelevant.

Translators were among those who paid for this mistake: In July of 1991, the Italian translator of *The Satanic Verses*, Ettore Caprioli, was stabbed in his apartment in Milan, but survived. Days later, the Japanese translator, Hitoshi Igarashi, an Islamic scholar, was stabbed to death in his office at Tsukuba University in Tokyo.

As far as I know, Rushdie has never made any extended comment on Hitoshi Igarashi. It would take another kind of novelist— Dostoyevsky perhaps— to untangle the psychological, moral, and spiritual meanings and effects of the story of these two: the man who became the most famous writer in the world at the price of what seemed until recently to be life imprisonment, and the anonymous man who died for a faithful translation of an old mistranslation, paying for the writer’s

mistake.

Translation is the most anonymous of professions, yet people die for it. It is an obvious necessity that is considered a problem. (There are never conferences on the “pleasures of translation.”) Yet it is a problem that only arises in the interstices when one is not casually referring to some translated bit of literature: the Bible, Homer, Kafka, Proust. . . Could it possibly be that translation essentially has no problems at all? That it only has successes and failures? There is no text that cannot be translated; there are only texts that have not yet found their translators. A translation is not inferior to the original; it is only inferior to other translations, written or not yet written. There is no definitive translation because a translation always appears in the context of its contemporary literature, and the realm of the possible in any contemporary literature is in constant flux— often, it should be emphasized, altered by the translations that have entered into it. Everything worth translating should be translated as many times as possible, even by the same translator, for you can never step into the same original twice. Poetry is that which is worth translating, and translation is what keeps literature alive. Translation is change and motion; literature dies when it stays the same, when it has no place to go.

Eliot Weinberger's books of essays include *Works on Paper*, *Outside Stories*, *Written Reaction*, and most recently, *Karmic Traces*. With Octavio Paz, he is the co-author of *19 Ways of Looking at Wang Wei* (a study of Chinese poetry translation). His edition of the *Selected Non-Fictions* of Jorge Luis Borges won the National Book Critics Circle Award for criticism in 1999.

Mr. Weinberger is the editor and translator of many books by Octavio Paz, including the *Collected Poems 1957-1987*, *Eagle or Sun?*, *Sunstone*, *In Light of India*, *A Tree Within*, *A Draft of Shadows*, *Selected Poems*, *A Tale of Two Gardens*, and *An Erotic Beyond: Sade*. Among his other translations are Vincente Huidobro's *Altazor*, Xavier Villaurrutia's *Nostalgia for Death*, Homero Aridjis's *Exaltation of Light*, Jorge Luis Borges's *Seven Nights*, and *Unlock* by Bei Dao.

In 1992 he was given the first PEN/Kolovakos Award for his work in promoting Hispanic literature in the United States, and this year he became the first American literary writer to be decorated with the Order of the Aztec Eagle by the government of Mexico.

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