Why I Love Translating [1]

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Essay by Patricia Dubrava

The Satisfaction of Solving a Thorny Sentence

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What I love about translating stories is that I don't have to worry about conflict, character, setting, or how they will end: the author handles all that grunt work. Like any sidewalk superintendent worth her salt, I have opinions about how the story *should* have been written, but I don't have to begin with that daunting blank page.

I take perfectly baked *bolillos*, reassemble their recipe in English, try to make the resulting rolls taste like their Mexican originals. My challenges are tone and style more than content. I spend abundant time on delectable matters like syntax and word choice. My reward? The author saying, "I was hearing my own voice, but in English."

Translating prose is in some respects risk-free. Someone can say, "That's a perverse story," or "I don't like how it ends," and I can just smile. No skin off my nose. "Yeah!" I reply. "Perverse, isn't it?" Or, "I would have ended that story with him slamming the door in her face, myself." Forget what it's about, though: could you tell it wasn't written in English to begin with? That's where I come in. In his *Notes from the Hall of Uselessness*, essayist, translator, and

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cultural scholar Simon Leys writes:

> No other literary activity demands so total a mastery of the language in which one is working . . . . It is desirable to understand the language of the original, but it is indispensable to master the target language.

As Leys has it, my English had better be top-notch; my Spanish can be a work in progress. There are any number of good English translations done with less-than-perfect knowledge of the original language—Merwin from thirty-eight languages; Robert Bly from Norwegian, Hindi, German, Swedish, Spanish, and Chinese. Both were outstanding English-language poets, their English indeed top-notch.

Bly and Merwin worked in times when a writer could earn substantial income by translating. Those were the days. Now, Columbian novelist Juan Gabriel Vásquez is more often right: “I have a tendency to trust translators, mainly because nobody does it for the money,” he told readers of *The Guardian*’s books site. This is especially true in the United States.

At a 2012 workshop I attended, noted British translator Margaret Jull Costa said, “U.S. publishers are mean.” That’s British for *cheap*. Or would *stingy* be better? *Skinflints*? I’ve published thirty stories in translation in a variety of journals in recent years. Of the thirty, two paid cash. The rest largely didn’t even offer the contributor copies we got in the old days, since most are solely digital now. I can offer you links, but who knows how long they will take you somewhere.

Literary translation requires different skills from those demanded of, say, court interpreters. I freaked when first asked to translate for parents as a Spanish teacher. Simultaneous translation is not my forte. Neither is telling a parent something like, “Your son is failing three classes”—I have enough trouble doing that in English. I’d rather tell them, “Las notas de su hijo no son buenas” and let it go at that.

Interpreting is quick work. Translation, like literary work of any kind, is not. I type a first draft full of holes and questions and awkward syntax, then go through with online translators, more research, and dictionaries—Spanish and English—to bridge the gap between the author’s vocabulary and my own. The various drafts may take weeks or months. Sometimes, during an afternoon walk by the lake, I will solve a particularly thorny sentence. There is no finer satisfaction.

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I came to Spanish teaching accidentally, having neither majored in languages nor spent my junior year abroad. Instead, random classes added up to a Spanish credential. And so, I landed my first teaching job. “Oh, you can teach Spanish, too!” the interviewer exclaimed. I nodded sagely, not sure that was the case.

My development *en español* was informed by my equally accidental marrying into a Colorado family that spoke Spanglish. During that decade, I learned useful profanity and fun expressions like “Dale gas, comps,” which more or less means “You go, bro.”

The great contemporary translator Edith Grossman writes in her introduction to *Why Translation Matters*: “ . . . serious professional translators . . . think of themselves—forgive me, I mean ourselves—as writers, no matter what else may

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cross our minds when we ponder the work we do, and I also believe we are right to do so."

Many of the best translators know the language of the original well, but I share an advantage with *all* the best: I'm a writer, too. That's what I love most about translating. It's writing. Perhaps you've noticed that the best translations of poetry are done by poets? I think again of Merwin and Bly. Maybe it takes one to translate one.

In the 1970s, a slender, rose-jacketed chapbook came into my possession: Pablo Neruda's *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair*, translated by W. S. Merwin. My first Neruda. My first Merwin. Two formidable poets.

Merwin, in an *Artful Dodge* interview, shared, "Translation is a way of keeping one close to what one is doing, to the possibilities of one's own language." Poetry translation done right puts the original on the facing page, a luxury seldom afforded with prose. In that petite pink paperback, I examined Merwin's choices line by line and received a revelation: translation is seldom literal, often complicated.

Merwin made decisions with every line, even that simple and famous first one: "Puedo escribir los versos más tristes esta noche." He knew "tonight" had to come first, not last, as it so beautifully does in Spanish, for the sake of English rhythms. One must have a poet's ear to know such things.

People say, "I love that poem 'Tonight I can write the saddest lines.'" And I reply, "Oh, yes. Neruda in Merwin's syntax. You do know you're reading Merwin? And Neruda?"

Jerome, translation's patron, translated the Bible into Latin in the fourth century and was sainted for that monumental accomplishment. From him, translators received their golden rule: Render the sense rather than the words of the text. The directive is largely undisputed.

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Annie Dillard in *The Writing Life* tells the story of a writer who was asked by a student, "Do you think I could be a writer?" "Well," the writer replied, "Do you like sentences?"

You have to like sentences to be a writer. You have to enjoy fiddling with them and rearranging them, finding more precise words, reading them aloud to see how they flow or don't, and finding flab to be excised. I love doing all of that. In translation, the ante is raised: besides the above, altering syntax and selecting the best word from a multitude of potential meanings.

In that Costa workshop, my fellow attendees and I were given a Javier Marías paragraph. The first sentence contained the phrase "Yo suponía que estarían de viaje." I translated it as "I imagined they might be traveling." Others chose "suspected," "speculated," or "supposed." One wrote, "I figured they were on vacation." Someone else: "out of town." So many possibilities, none of them wrong. "Which sounds most like Marías?" each of us wondered. "Which mimics his rhythm?" And because Marías writes page-long sentences: "Which fits best as a clause within a lengthy sentence?"

I started my creative life as a poet, and in the long years since I was given my first diary with its gold lock and tiny key, I've kept writing. Standing in line at a coffee shop pre-COVID, I told someone in casual conversation that I used to be a poet. An older woman and a young man in line behind me, strangers to me and each other, immediately objected: once a poet, always a poet. It's not a position one can resign from. I do still write poems now and then.

But writing as a practice has never ceased. My blog contains more than 300 short essays now, in a feuilleton form I relish. Translation is a source of enrichment: outfitting another writer's content with new words sharpens my editing edge for my own work and teaches me when to be ruthless. Each of those little essays has been through a minimum of five revisions.

As others have said, writing is how I understand the world and myself; thankfully, complete understanding has yet to be obtained. In his first "Tabula Rasa" piece in the *New Yorker* (January 2020), John McPhee explains the need for an old-person project, "the purpose of which is to keep the old writer alive by never coming to an end." He cites Mark

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Twain's autobiography as a prime example: "If ever there was an old-man project, this one was the greatest. It is only seven hundred and thirty-five thousand words long. If Mark Twain had stayed with it, he would be alive today."

Translating is the writing I do when I hit roadblocks in my other work. It augments my own language, challenges my selection skills, makes writing from other cultures available to English-only readers. And as I am not likely to stop writing, even as I age and care less about worldly rewards, translation offers me a project without end.



Publishing Information

- *Notes from the Hall of Uselessness*, by Simon Leys, The Cahiers Series, Center for Writers and Translators, American University of Paris, 2008.

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- More on Merwin's work in 38 languages: "Selected Translations by W.S. Merwin [5]," *Three Percent* (website), University of Rochester, April 17, 2013.
- "Live webchat: Juan Gabriel Vásquez [6]" hosted by *The Guardian*, February 24–25, 2012.
- *Why Translation Matters* by Edith Grossman, Yale University Press, 2010.
- "A Conversation with W.S. Merwin [7]," Merwin in conversation with Daniel Bourne, *Artful Dodge* magazine (website).
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- *The Writing Life* by Annie Dillard, HarperCollins, 1989.
- "Tabula Rasa: Volume One [9]" by John McPhee, *The New Yorker*, January 13, 2020.

Art Information

- "Time and Rituals (11) [10]," "Time and Rituals (4) [11]," "Atmosfear (19) [12]" © Seigar; used by permission.

Patricia Dubrava has published two books of poems and one book of stories translated from Spanish. She teaches creative writing and translation at the University of Denver and practices short-form creative nonfiction on her blog, *Holding the Light*. Her longer essays have been published in *Hippocampus*, *Talking Writing*, and other journals. Her translations of Mexican short fiction have appeared in 30 journals, including *The Massachusetts Review*. Some of her poems appeared most recently in *Bristlecone* in March and September 2022.

For more information, visit Patricia Dubrava's website [13].

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