On Translation: The Perils and the Pleasure

by Wulf Losee

Jorge Luis Borges recounts in a biographical note that after he first read an English translation of Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote* and then later read *Don Quixote* in its original Spanish that ". . . it sounded like a bad translation to me." Translation has always been the problem child of literature.

Reading a work in its original language is considered the ideal way to appreciate the author's art, but learning a new language in order to read a work is beyond many people's capabilities or patience. The goal of most literary translation is to stick as closely as possible to the author's original meaning. However, literary art also depends on style or voice. Textualist translators consider porting the style of an author to another language to be of secondary importance. As long as the meaning of the words are strictly adhered to, the textualists will be satisfied.

Borges held a contrarian view to the textualists. He saw literary translation as an art form through which the literary art of the original culture can cross-pollinate with the literary forms of the target culture, thereby enriching the literature of the target culture. In Borges' opinion, a translation should aspire to become a new work of art rather than a derivative copy of the original.

The shortcomings of textualism when confronting style are vividly illustrated when translating poetry. By its very essence, poetry is an abstraction of language, where images can replace precise meaning, where meter and rhythm create music out of language, where literary references are alluded to by symbols, and where there may not be a one-to-one correspondence of vocabulary between two languages.

In the nineteenth century, English translators were obsessed with the importance of rhyme; and unrhymed poetry in English was rare during that period. Edward Fitzgerald's *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* faithfully followed the rhyming patterns of Khayyam's Persian quatrains, but in order to get his rhyming schemes to work, Fitzgerald was forced to use words with different meanings from the original. Not being able to find rhyming words in English with the same meaning for the rhymed pairs of Persian words, Fitzgerald distorted the literal meaning of Khayyam's quatrains. Despite this lack of textual integrity, Fitzgerald's *Rubaiyat* incorporates the themes of Khayyam's poem, expressing those themes in a quintessentially English manner. While it might be considered a failure in the eyes of the textualists, Fitzgerald's translation of *The Rubaiyat* is one of the most beautiful series of poems of Victorian English literature.

Wulf Losee's essay is referenced in a writing prompt "Slipping Into Another Language," from *How to Begin, Poems, Prompts, Tips and Writing Exercises from the Fresh Ink Poetry Collective* (Raven & Wren Press, 2020). He is currently working on a collection of his translations of Tang dynasty poems, and his responses, tentatively titled, *Zēng Dà: Letters to the Masters.*

Wulf's poetry has appeared in many literary journals, including Arsenic Lobster, Crack the Spine, Forge, FRiGG, Full Moon, The Griffin, The New Guard, The North Coast Literary Review, Oak Square, Oxford Magazine, Pennsylvania English, Pirene's Fountain, Poetalk Magazine, Rio Grande Review, SLAB, Street Light Magazine, Studio1, Westview, and Whistling Shade. Wulf shares his living space with his two cats who are severely critical of his poetic efforts. "Writing poetry detracts from play time, petting time, and from feeding them treats," Wulf said. "They regularly show their contempt for my muse by walking nimble-footed across my keyboard." He added that they do enjoy it when he reads them Chinese poetry while stroking their fur.

Borges' father, Jorge Guillermo Borges Haslam, was bilingual English / Spanish, and he translated *The Rubaiyat* into Spanish. Some critics think Haslam based his translation on Fitzgerald's.

If you are lucky enough to be bilingual and want to try your hand at translation, you might begin with translating a poem from English into your second language. English, which is a hybrid of Romance and German languages, can render our sister languages relatively easily. Other Indo-European languages may be slightly more difficult to translate, but English has a flexible grammar, an abundant vocabulary, and one can almost always find a word that fits the meaning and the metrical stress of the original.

In my experience, rhyming can be more of challenge because the one-to-one correspondences of words and concepts become when working in another language.

If you're not bilingual, or you do not have passing familiarity with the language you wish to translate, do not give up hope! There are bilingual dictionaries for almost every language and today's Internet offers online tools that were unavailable two decades ago. Google's translation tool can handle 108 languages. Most modern languages with a literary tradition are included, and it even has Latin.

A word of caution: translation programs can give misleading results. Although most translations programs can yield up the gist of the meaning for a phrase, sentence, line, or word, one should always double-check the output with a language dictionary and whenever possible, a reader fluent in the language.

Grammatical forms and tenses of a foreign language may have no exact parallel in English. If you are a textualist, it may require awkward circumlocutions to render those tenses and forms into English. The full meaning of the original may get conveyed, but you will need to ask yourself: will your translated poem be worse or better for the extra verbiage?

My first attempt at translation was an epiphany in two ways. First, I discovered that I could translate poems from the Chinese with the Internet tools available. Secondly, because my first attempt at translation yielded something unique and beautiful in English.

The impetus to begin was my frustration reading two very different translations of "Rising from Drunkenness on a Spring Day" by Li Bái (aka Li Po or Li Bo), a poet from the Tang Dynasty. Most translators prefer the title "Waking from Drunkenness on a Spring Day." Rising is the alternate meaning for the waking character. After I did my own translation I felt that 'rising' better expresses the movement of the narrator through the images of the poem. The two translations I read of Li Bái's poem were so divergent that I wanted to know what the poet actually wrote.

Although I mastered some basic conversational Cantonese while living in Hong Kong, I could only read a few dozen Chinese characters. In a Chinese dictionary, all the words are organized into 214 categories defined by their first stroke, which is known as the

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radical; then the words are organized by the number of strokes it takes to complete the character. Looking these characters up can be a challenging and tedious process and I didn't have the patience. Fortunately, I was able to locate the original Chinese text of "Rising from Drunkenness on a Spring Day" on zh.wikisource.org, a digital repository of everything written in Chinese up through the 17th Century. Luckily, the Chrome browser has the ability to translate web pages from foreign languages, so that helped me to navigate the site.

Once I had the Chinese characters for the title, and using the site's search function, I was able to locate the original text of this poem. I cut and pasted the text into Google Translate, but the results were unsatisfactory. The characters changed meanings over the centuries, and so I ended up with lines of classical Chinese mixed up with contemporary usages. Google is continually improving their translation program, and one is much less likely today to get an obviously garbled result. Ironically, this may make it more difficult to ensure that there hasn't been an obvious mistranslation.

Since Google Translate wasn't up to the task, I used the free dictionary offered by the www.mandarintools.com/worddict.html website to translate each character individually. I then created a gloss translation of the text in English. Most of the characters have three to five meanings in English, though. While many were synonymous in English, some were quite divergent. My first task was to puzzle out what the poet meant by trying to fit each word with a questionable meaning into the context of the entire line. In several cases, I was faced with two perfectly valid readings that were quite different. Suddenly I understood why I was seeing the different translations of "Rising from Drunkenness." Both translations were done by scholars, but even the scholars didn't agree.

"Rising from Drunkenness" is a twelve-line poem. Each line is five words long, meaning each line has five characters in it. There is also a rhyming scheme and meter set by the words' tones. In ancient China, poems were sung to musical accompaniment instead of being recited. As an example of the task I was facing, let's look at line eight of the poem. Like all the lines in the poem, it is five characters long:

春風語流鶯

Google Translate renders the entire line as "spring breeze." Two words in English from five words in Chinese is a clue that we may have lost some of the meaning in translation. The other eleven lines showed that only about half the meaning of the poem was coming through.

Using the Mandarin Tools Dictionary, I made an English gloss of the sixty words of "Rising from Drunkenness." Here is what the Mandarin Tools Dictionary yielded for line eight:

In ancient China, poems were sung to musical accompaniment instead of being recited.

春 – spring (time); gay; joyful; youthful; love; lust; life
風 – wind; news; style; custom; manner
語 – dialect; language; speech
流 – to flow; to spread; to circulate; to move
鶯 – golden oriole

In his 1919 translation, Arthur Waley presents this line as "The Spring wind was telling the mango-bird." A.S. Kline's translation is "Song of the oriole in Spring breezes." I favor "The spring wind's language flows from an oriole" or "the oriole's flowing speech on the spring wind." The former is probably more accurate because flow is a verb. Chinese doesn't have any prepositions. Therefore, we don't really know in which direction things are flowing, but I would say a likely interpretation is that speech was flowing from the oriole, and the bird is talking to or in the wind. I suspect Li Bái's audience would appreciate the ambiguity; the reader is allowed to form their own image without being forced by the poet to interpret it one way or the other.

I didn't want to use the word *song* in this line. In English birds sing, but I've never seen Chinese poets refer to birds singing. Birds seem to *talk* in China rather than sing. There might not be a distinction between poetry and song for the Chinese poets, so the oriole's song was *speech*.

After completing a gloss translation of all twelve lines, I read the gloss out loud several times, incorporating all possible meanings for each character to try and determine which path to follow through the maze of ambiguities in this poem. Reading out loud is crucial for every poet, and especially critical when doing translation.

Then the translator, like those done by scholars, needs to make choices. I came to realize that the English synonyms and alternative meanings piled upon one another had their own rhythm. And rather than being parsimonious, I opted for extravagance. Each word of the original poem in Chinese became a separate line of three to five English words. This is the stanza I created from line eight:

> the springtime, joyful, youthful
> winds, news, styles
> of flowing speech
> the golden language
> of an oriole

Yes, the entire translation sang! Best of all, except for Li Bái's spare style, nothing has been lost from the original poem's meaning, because all the possible meanings of each word are contained within the translation.

While I suspect that the textualists would wince at my first effort in translation, I think Borges would have chuckled.

To ensure that no one mistook this for an exact translation, I entitled my derivative poem, "Disinterpreting Li Bái's Rising from

Online Translation Tools

Linguee
www.linguee.com
Linguee provides the capability to translate words and phrases from an extensive list of languages. It also searches the Web for examples of alternative translations. It offers a limited free plan, and is available as a paid subscription.

Wiktionary
www.wiktionary.org
Wiktionary aspires to be a universal dictionary of all languages. The website's list of languages is huge and supports extinct languages like Old English, Old Norse, and Ancient Greek.

Magic Search
www.magicsearch.org
A multilingual metasearch engine that provides users the ability to search across multiple sources (dictionaries, corpora, machine translation engines, search engines) with a single click. Although it might be a tool for a hard to find word meaning, one criticism is that it outputs too much information to analyze easily.

Drunkenness on a Spring Day and Trying to Speak." I began each of my English lines with the character that I was trying to translate—and so the reader isn't deprived of the source material, I make a point of leaving the original poem beneath my translations:

Disinterpreting Li Bái's Rising from Drunkenness on a Spring Day and Trying to Speak

springtime, joyful
day, sun
drunk
rising, waking
to speak
aspiration, will

to live, to dwell, in a place, a spot
on the age of a world's lifespan
seems as if it were
a vast deep
dream illusion

the what, why, how
that handles and governs acts
and the toils of
such that we
give birth, are born, grow

in the actuality of place, reality
according to, so as to
end, finish
the day in the sun
intoxicated, drunk

balding, decadent
so correctly right, thus
we lie lolling slouching
in front
of the pillars

sleeping, awakening, thinking, feeling
to come, to appear here
longing, hoping
into a courtyard
returning

one single
bird
a fancy flower blossom
between each space
in its song, its cry, its call

an excuse, a pretext
to ask
this and these
to carry us
though time, seasons, and hours

the springtime, joyful, youthful
winds, news, styles
of flowing speech
the golden language
of an oriole

to feel, to touch, affect
a part of him her it
with desire, longing, appetite
then to sigh
breathe, rest

oppose, answer, and reply correctly
with liquor
once more, again
from oneself
collapse, pour out

grand vast
songs
to stay, to delay, to clear
the bright understanding
in this moon, this month

a crooked tune
used up, exhausted, it stops
then afterwards
we forget, neglect
feeling, emotion, passion, our situation

Here is the original text Li Bái's poem in traditional Chinese characters. The punctuation is a modern addition to make it more readable.

春日醉起言志
李白

處世若大夢，胡爲勞其生。
所以終日醉，頹然臥前楹。
覺來盼庭前，一鳥花間鳴。
借問此何時，春風語流鶯。
感之欲歎息，對酒還自傾。
浩歌待明月，曲盡已忘情。