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WRITING IS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE, AND A SENIOR WRITING WORKSHOP IS A TOWER OF BABEL WHOSE MANY LANGUAGES NEED TO BE TRANSLATED

Michelle Barany

This paper, presented at the CCCC 2008 Senior Citizens Writing session, draws upon my experiences as a senior workshop member and past teacher. Addressing workshop leaders, it emphasizes the need for the many-faceted seniors' voices to be "translated" and tested within a workshop's microcosm before entering the outside world's macrocosm.

When, in 1966, my eighty-two-year-old grandmother and my dad came from France for the first time to visit our family in Santa Ana, California, my husband, Robert, and I took them along the coast. When she saw the ocean, my grandmother experienced a dizzying feeling of wonder that she expressed like this: "Who would have thought," she said, one hand holding her purse, the other extending palm up toward the impetuous, foaming waves; "Who would have thought that I would live to see the Pacific Ocean some day?" And my dad, who, for several years, had lived in La Rochelle, along the Atlantic coast of France, filled his lungs with long, vivifying breaths of the Pacific iodine air, as if to permeate every cell of his body. He was also steadying his voice. He moved his head back and forth several times and said, accentuating each word and pausing between them, "L'Océan Pacifique."

I experience a feeling of wonder akin to my dad's and my grandmother's when I, now a grandmother, think: Who would have thought when I was five years old, carrying a doll that never smiled and running down a dusty country road with two Gypsy children to see their trailer (and hopefully ride in), that some day some of my stories would appear, along with my husband's in Ross Winterowd's anthology, *Senior Citizens Writing*, published by David Blakesley at *Parlor Press*? And that the Senior Writing Workshop started by Ross Winterowd in 1999, as part of the education program of the Huntington Beach Union High School District in California, would keep me so active in writing that one of my poems would appear in a recent volume of *Le Forum* and one essay in the current issue of *Writing on the Edge*? It is dizzying.

Having taught literary translations from French into English and English into French at California State University, Long Beach, I will begin by quoting from *Theories of Translations* by Rainer Schulte and John Biguenet, one of two books that the students and I used during the course. In the introduction, Gadamer is quoted as stating: "Reading is already translation, and translation is translation for the second time ... (Schulte and Biguenet)" Similarly, Hans Erich Nossack, German short story writer, critic and translator, says that "the act of writing a literary piece is already an act of translation, 'Because writing itself is already translating.'" Following a slightly skewed logic, then, it would seem that if writing is translating, then writing is, indeed, a foreign language.

A related opinion is expressed by Ross Winterowd when, in *The Culture and Politics of Literacy* chapter titled, “To Write,” he states that the “writer projects meaning through text—a language system” out of which the “reader constructs meaning through” the system of cues. In so doing, aren’t the readers performing the mental operation of translating the cues?

It ensues that all of us who read and write are translators. And when we write, we are translators of the author we know or ought to know best, our own self.

And where better than in a senior writing workshop can we find translators of “foreign”—and unique—languages? In such a setting, examples abound, substantiating the assertion that writing *is*, indeed, a foreign language. The workshops are attended by retired, experienced people used to their own “jargon.” That jargon may be technical, philosophical, psychological, medical, lawyerly, educational, religious, political, “homemakerly,” etc. Regardless, that jargon has been shaped by whatever profession (or background) theirs was. Should they continue communicating in such varied languages, the workshop members would soon transform the classroom into Babel Land, where communication might equate with confusion (as Derrida would probably claim). Most seniors have held occupations that are as foreign to the kind of individual writing they now intend to do as if, without prior knowledge or experience, they had to build a statue with intangible atoms from another planet. It is up to them, up to us in a senior workshop, to seize these intangible atoms twirling through our brains—those strange planets—to capture and fuse them into translatable thoughts that we will set on the page, in such a way that they will be intelligible to the workshop readers first, then to intended readers. Whether our ultimate audience be family, friends, or members of a larger group, it is within the microcosm of the workshop that we will be able to find what Parelman calls, “the language of the universal audience” (an audience that includes all mankind) and test whether we can first engage the members in the workshop. [Some members in the group, however, may choose to address a “particular audience” imagined by the writer, possibly using the English dialect of an area, or describing scenes and customs foreign to the western norm]. However, regardless of the choice each of us makes, whether we choose to address a particular or a universal audience, we must become the best translator of the writer within. We must be that writer’s best channel, best connection to the outside world, thus passing from the microcosm within the workshop into the macrocosm of the world beyond.

How do we acquire this “language of a universal audience?” Out of many possible parallelisms, I would like to consider three that, in my opinion, apply to both activities of writing and translating.

First—I believe—writers translating themselves and translators of foreign works must choose subjects to their liking. Both groups want to interpret works that they respect, that they consider worthwhile. The subject may be despicable, but it must, in some way, be meaningful to them and compel them to “translate” it. Assignments would not be productive in either group, and this is especially true in a senior writing workshop. Senior members want to

become involved in subjects that are of interest to them. Indeed, when they join a workshop, many already know what they want to write about; consequently, their search is about the best way to do it, so that they may best communicate their intents with others. Moreover, they are in the workshop not only to learn that “language of the universal audience” but also to test whether they, writers/translators, are engaging the audience of readers/translators in the workshop. Learning the new language is a daunting but rewarding task, for, when they do, they can then move on from the microcosm of the workshop—which already contains the macrocosm of the larger world—into the outside world where their intended audience resides.

Second, translators (of foreign works), it is said in *The Theories of Translation*, ought to be fluent in both the original and the target languages if they are to understand and render the nuances of the original; or, as Dryden stated, “The qualification of a translator worth reading must be a mastery of the language he translates out of, and that he translates into.” Writers translating themselves onto paper, whether in standard English or non-standard English, ought to get in touch with themselves in order to become “fluent” with their own thoughts, so that they may render the nuances of their own perceptions concerning a character or a scene. And this would be the equivalent of the fluency in the *initial* language that translators of foreign works ought to have.

Now how do writers develop and increase their own fluency in the initial language of their minds?

I would say by reaching within their own memories, then by selecting some and expanding upon them, that is by asking themselves questions that may touch upon the pathos of their lives. At first, the workshop members may not be adept at asking relevant questions, but skilled workshop leaders will train them. Indeed, the leaders will neither dictate nor assign tasks, but they will ask questions: Why did you choose this subject? Why this one and not that one? How do you feel as you write about it? What details provoked your reaction? Who was present during your outing? Where did it take place? Why did you want to go? Why didn’t you want to go? Can you tell us about the surroundings? What else can you describe? Etc. . . . It is amazing how one question may, at times, open a flood of memories, thus triggering the kind of emotions and details the best memoirs, essays and stories are made of. The writers, now proficient at emulating the leader, will probably not incorporate all they’ve discovered about their subject and themselves anymore than painters will necessarily show all the details of a landscape in a painting, but their familiarization with the topic, the “fluency” that they will have acquired will greatly guide their pens.

In addition, writers, translators of themselves, ought to remain aware of the emotions provoked in and around them by their characters’ actions, in order to translate them onto the page. Here, again, they want to do it as best as they can. As a bonus in the process, they may better understand their own motivation, or that of others. Long ago, at the beginning of writing classes I took at California State University, Long Beach, the professor, Dr. John Hermann, read from cards the size of my recipe cards, typed remarks

made by well-known writers, such as Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, William Faulkner, others. I remember his reading a statement by the prolific Swedish film director, Ingmar Bergman, stating that he had made the film, *Wild Strawberries*, I think it was *Wild Strawberries*, in order to understand his parents and to “justify himself to mythologically oversized parents” who had “turned away.”

What may now be the equivalent of being fluent in the *target* language, as opposed to the initial language, considered earlier? I would suggest that it may be becoming familiar with the different options available to a writer: point of view, style, tone, and voice. Here, however, the parallelism between writers/translators of themselves and translators of a foreign work ends: Whereas translators of a foreign work must not change the original writers’ style, writers translating themselves have many wonderful options to choose from: authorial, first person, third-person-limited viewpoints; interior monologues, dialogues, narratives; humorous, serious, sarcastic voices; romantic, realistic, surrealistic tones. These many options are denied to translators of foreign works.

Third, as translators of ourselves, we must respect the tone of the voice we hear. We must not betray ourselves any more than a translator of Henry James, for example, has the right to betray Henry James’ tone, be it satirical, serious, humorous, confrontational or simply leisurely descriptive. Examples abound, I believe, supporting this statement. If we want to present the protagonist in our writing in a serious, perhaps tragic situation, we must not unwittingly make him sound like Inspector Clouseau, especially in a workshop if the writer is the protagonist.

If, as I might have done forty years ago (I never went quite that far), I were to have recourse to animism to “translate” strong emotions and write: “As the hearse with Belova’s beloved body went by, the mighty Oaks, the tall Poplars and the powerful Buckeyes bowed their heads in joint sorrow and wrung their branches in despair, while their leaves gently waved good-bye, and the wind whispered words of comfort to the grieving,” I am sure that my lending a soul to the landscape would not sit well with any readers.

People writing in a foreign language may, at times, be influenced by their mother tongue, and show affinities with Clouseau. This “exclusivity” is not theirs alone. It may also happen to writers writing in their mother tongue. The friendly atmosphere of an effective senior writing workshop will help redirect these errant travelers back into a less bumpy trail . . .

An advantage to being writers/translators as opposed to translators of foreign works: While beginning writers in a senior writing workshop will become experts at expressing, rendering, in other words searching and hopefully finding the right word, thus “translating exactly” their own intentions, the best translation of a foreign author’s work remains an approximation. Some concepts—the German “angst,” for instance—, are untranslatable in English or in French; so are some expressions like the French “Un je ne sais quoi” into English; as are terms of endearment, some lines in a poem, some metaphors, some rhythms; and, especially, most alliterations. Renowned

translators, among them, José Ortega y Gasset in “The Splendor and Misery of Translation” have recognized the problem. Very often, translators of foreign writers have to use “adequate equivalencies.” It is a term used by Wilhelm von Humboldt stating that fidelity cannot be found in literalness, but rather in “adequate equivalencies.” Writers translating themselves onto paper do not have to use “adequate equivalencies.” Or do they?

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