
Scholars and practitioners of literary translation would do well not to pre-judge *Poetry & Translation*, Peter Robinson’s excellent contribution to the Translation Studies canon, by its misleading subtitle, “The Art of the Impossible,” for it is precisely such tired canards about rendering poetic texts that this well-argued new volume seeks to debunk. Taking on Robert Frost’s “preemptive aphorism” (107) declaring poetry to be what is lost in translation, Robinson, a poet-translator and professor of English and American Literature at the University of Reading, lists the unique qualities that have occasioned claims for the genre’s exceptionalism:

Poetry is then said to be untranslatable, or, more practically, poems are untranslatable, or, more subtly, in a poetic text the poetry is untranslatable, because it is the synthesized meeting point of at least five different aspects of uniqueness: (1) the entire structural, sonic, and semantic complex which is the language, or languages, in which the poem is written; (2) the particular historical state of that complex at the time the work was written; (3) the individual poet’s deployed version of that language, his or her idiolect; (4) the poetic voice, or style, of the poet (at that point in her or his creative life); and (5) the particular development of that idiom in this individual poem. (80-81)

Robinson effectively discredits this widely held but little examined misconception in two ways: first, by demonstrating
how it is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of what translation entails, then by arguing for a sort of linguistic relativism regarding the project of translation in general. Pointing out that his own poetry translations “were produced with the operative assumption that it was the aim in translating poetry to be faithfully accurate and to make translations that read well as poems in their own right” (ix), Robinson underscores the need to jettison the baneful (that is, utopian and messianic) view of translation as replication producing absolute equivalence between a source-text poem and its target-text counterpart, writing: “the exact reproduction of the poetry of the original is strictly impossible. However, since no translation can be such a reproduction, while this sets a limit to what translating can achieve, it doesn’t set such a limit only to the translation of poetry but to the translation of anything, and to those translations from experience which are original poems. Once this is accepted, then it becomes possible to see how poetry, like everything else, is translatable, if that word is understood to mean a remaking in the other terms of a different structure of materials” (173). In brief, Robinson affirms that poetry translation should be pursued for what it is, “faithfully imitative approximation” (32), and that “if we look back at the five reasons for poetry’s being untranslatable given above, it can be seen that they could be applied to the conditions not only of any piece of writing, but of any piece of language use” (82).

*Poetry & Translation*, then, adopts an optimistic creative outlook toward poetry translation, secure in the belief, given the impossibility of achieving sameness, that “translation confidence can be sustained because human situations are analogous, or can, at a minimum be understood analogically, and because languages display family resemblances, so they appear, at least up to a point to be talking to each other” (80). Reminding the reader that
“understanding is itself necessarily approximate because it means others’ ability to demonstrate the internalizing of knowledge or capacity in their own self-generated terms and actions” (106), Robinson challenges the philosophical underpinnings of translational impossibility posited by such thinkers as Willard V. Quine, who sees meaning as non-generalizable and confined to unique “stimulus situations.” Viewing translation, poetic or otherwise, as primarily an interplay between signifying systems and not between a language and its would-be referents while deeming it “at best hopeful humanism or at worst colonizing ethnocentrism to assume that, behind all these differences of behavior and expression, we all feel the same emotions” (77), Robinson continues his line of thought about what poetry translation can hope to accomplish by considering the feeling at the very center of the human condition:

The situational coordinates in particular uses of Pablo Neruda’s ‘amor’, Shakespeare’s ‘love’, Goethe’s ‘Liebe’, Paul Verlaine’s ‘amour’, and Gaspara Stampa’s ‘amore’ cannot be reduced the one to the other in the interests of a universal human emotion—because of the conditions in which these concepts arose and in which they were and, evolving, continue to be acted out and upon by historically specific persons. Though they can be listed as dictionary equivalents, they cannot be taken as synonymously defining the same emotion under different conditions, for the very reason that Donald Davidson offers for skepticisms about assuming that the translation of a truth will automatically produce a truth, namely, that translations relate languages, while truth relates language to world. (78)
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Ever the pragmatist in light of translation’s true nature and, more specifically, what a poetry translator may reasonably expect to achieve, Robinson concludes that, as poetry translators,

[w]e have to go ahead as if ‘love’ and ‘amour’ were appropriately similar, because, beyond sitting tight in pristine isolation, we have no alternative; and we have to translate as much of the context as we can so that the ‘love’ in the poem has a flavor of ‘amour’ about it. This is less difficult than might be thought, because honestly made and presented translations render the historical and cultural situations in which the linguistic usage is taking place, and they expect to be read as other-language accounts of an elsewhere. Reading them requires an exercise of imaginative projection into the conditions of the other country. (79-80)

Robinson is particularly vexed by the false dichotomy of methodology presented to modern-day poetry translators in the polar extremes of Vladimir Nabokov and Robert Lowell. The former’s paradoxical belief that close semantic rendering at the expense of form attains the closest “literal” version Robinson considers a “polemical travesty,” while the latter’s use of source-text poems as little more than springboards for his own poetic exploration via “imitations” Robinson views as “an invitation to ‘legitimized’ slapdash” (42). Robinson rightly complains that such “[l]iberties are supported with arguments that exclude the middle term in an account of translating which states that because exact reproduction of an original is impossible, poets should take advantage of this fact to spin off ‘poems in their own right’ that nevertheless retain odd relations with their sponsoring
originals” (32). He similarly notes that “[w]hat may be mistaken about Nabokov’s approach is that while he accepts that sacrifices will have to be made in making translations, he doesn’t allow the sacrifices to be evenly distributed, negotiated, or completely mitigated across the entire field of poetic composition. For him, the sacrifices have to be made in the field of sonic cohesion and formal significance” (46). The “most lamentable consequence” of adhering too closely to either of these outlying positions or “this false division of labour,” as Robinson phrases it, is that “it cuts the ground from under the feet of the person who aims to make a translation of a poem that is as faithful as possible both at the level of paraphrase and at that of formal expertise” (38).

Indeed, while Robinson exhibits little patience for poetry translators guided by the “mistaken assumption that there can be literal translations of poems that by definition are superior in accuracy to renderings, which attempt, for instance, to imitate the formal structuring of a poem” (86), he appears even less indulgent of those who would look beyond the verbal source text to capture the “spirit” of a work. If, after all, “the poetic emotions are not in the words of the original” (76), Robinson wonders where, in fact, they lie. He clearly views the extrapolation of a posited, intangible poetic “essence” as a pretext for the loose, non-textually based rendering he decries from Lowell and his epigones, summarily stating: “The translator can attempt to be faithful to the original text. No essences are required” (153). His commonsensical approach to this manifestation of translational metaphysics is to focus squarely on the source text’s linguistic formulation. While 2 Corinthians 3:6 informs the Bible’s readers that “the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life,” Robinson is keen to inform poetry translators of the following gospel truth: “If, in making a translation, you want to render the spirit of the original, attempt a faithful rendering of the letter.
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That is where the spirit abides. You will nevertheless have to understand those words, and your translation will inevitably convey that understanding; but if you begin by assuming that you can’t come to that understanding by creatively rendering the original’s words in your translation, you are actively alienating yourself, your text, and its readers from the only trace of the very spirit that you may be claiming to render” (155).

Elsewhere in *Poetry & Translation*, Robinson touches on topics of abiding interest to poetry translation, three of which merit mention here. The first concerns the relationship between creative writing and translation, a difference some would level through the blinkered insistence that only poets can and/or should translate poetry. Rejecting Lowell’s versioning as emblematic of a translating poet’s default response, Robinson notes how translations can fruitfully encourage original poetic production, writing that “they often represent the encountering of an inspirational original that someone has chosen to translate with a craftsman-like effort to bring it to the reader. This craft-based art allows the poet-reader to envisage emulation within the dynamics of the impossible and awe-inspiring original through a plausibly achieved rendering of it” (5). Far from impinging upon the poet’s own voice in his/her native language, translation can instill in a poet “a respect for his or her own occasions and imaginative materials” (169). Without specifically citing Octavio Paz, who took great pains to differentiate original writing from translation, Robinson adduces a fundamental distinction of his own that follows logically from his repudiation of poetry’s untranslatability:

The implicit contrast between poets who can write “what they like” and translators who must modestly photograph their originals is false,
because translators can never “photograph” from one language to another, and original writers are involved in complex nets of responsibility to their inspiration, technique, language, materials, themes, œuvres, and readers. They have greater ranges of potential for revision; but they also have no completed work of art to act as their guide. Their superficial freedom to change things around is curtailed by their obligation to find a form that rings right; the translator is reading a form that presumably rings right and must find an equivalent for that rightness in another language. Both poet and translator are working within constraints; they are not precisely the same, but they are related constraints. (38)

Robinson’s take on translation as the refashioning of a poetic source text’s organic unicity, coupled with his call for a focus on the original poem’s linguistic composition, seems to point to a primarily semiotic approach to the endeavor now taking a back seat in Translation Studies to the “cultural turn.”

Second, Robinson wonders whether certain poetic texts lend themselves more readily than others to translation, and presents the much re-translated work of C. P. Cavafy as a kind of case study. Pondering “the possibility that Cavafy’s poetry may translate more than, say, Mallarmé’s because it is a poetry of situation, observation, and reflection, one in which the ‘poetry’ is less in the words than it may be with a self-consciously ‘pure’ poet of the later nineteenth century” (13), Robinson implies, following Eugenio Montale, that the linguistic complexity of both Aesthetic and Symbolist poems seriously challenges their successful rendering. Robinson goes on to add that “[E. M.] Forster also notes that Cavafy’s poems ‘are all short poems, unrhymed, so that
there is some hope of conveying them in a verbal translation’, and, after quoting some samples, he adds, ‘such a poem has, even in translation, a “distinguished” air”’ (15). Robinson thus underscores the difficulty of rendering formal qualities of conventional poetics, summarizing comments by W. H. Auden’s as meaning the “poet’s sensibility can be translated” when Auden specifically writes of Cavafy that “what survives translation and excites…[is s]omething I can only call, most inadequately, a tone of voice, a personal speech. I have read translations of Cavafy made by many different hands, but every one of them was immediately recognizable as a poem by Cavafy” (17-18). Attention to such formal characteristics of poetic discourse remains a criterion some claim distinguishes poetry translation from the translation of other types of language, although Robinson would be quick to point out that this putative difference is simply one of degree, and not of nature.

Lastly, Robinson broaches the question of translating living versus dead poets, an issue often phrased in terms of whether a distinction may be drawn between the first translation of a poem and its subsequent rendering(s). On this point, Robinson appears to join the majority of critics who see initial translations as hewing more literally to their respective source texts by demonstrating a clear bias toward semantic correlation. Quoting Nabokov’s wish that Lowell “would stop mutilating defenceless dead poets,” Robinson entertains the thought, following Michael Hofmann, that “[b]ecause most of his poets were not living contemporaries, and had already been multiply translated, they appear more available for mutilation than the living” (157). Underlying these broader questions are, of course, issues surrounding the much ballyhooed “need” for retranslation in light of the purportedly inevitable dating of target texts. Here, Robinson insightfully introduces a middle term between the archaic
and the “now no longer, colloquially current,” positing that “[b]eing ‘dated’, in this sense, means confined in a transitory state between ‘up to date’ and ‘of the past’” (53). This new category offers hope of a greater shelf-life to many a worthy rendering of source texts from all eras hastily (and wrongly) rejected for not reflecting the comforts of target-language immediacy.

Robinson, primarily a poet with fifteen titles to his credit listed on Poetry & Translation’s dust jacket, remains ultimately realistic, though upbeat about expectations for poetic renderings. Wondering, again, whether translations can approach their originals in quality, he guardedly concludes: “The aspirant translation could be poetry, but it wouldn’t be so in its character as a translation. Its poetic quality would be something created entirely in the terms of the translating poet’s skills as a composer of verse in the receiver language. Though poetry has been achieved, as it were, the contribution of translation as an activity has dropped out of the equation” (26). Scholars and practitioners of poetry translation will welcome this intelligent and insightful new book.