

A Journey in Disguise: the discovery of translation by Mitchell Wajda

Abstract

“Among intellectual undertakings, there is no humbler one. Nevertheless, it is an extremely demanding task.” This is how José Ortega y Gasset (1883-1955), a Spanish theorist, describes the art of translation. While he suggests its vitality in culture and communication, he does not forget the tedious, exhausting, and sometimes impossible nature of the form — just as an odyssey begins with a single step and forges itself into an epic feat of intellect and physical agility.

Translators encounter questions of fidelity and ethics that traverse the linguistic landscape of the task. They grapple with issues beyond how close one should remain to an original text — facing even more profound and specific conflicts in the journey of adapting a text from its original form and transforming it into a breathing artifact that has the capacity to remain true to its origins while bearing a new life and affecting readers of a different language, society, and culture. The journey of translation results in the bridging of gaps between peoples in the attempt to share knowledge and expand our cultural landscape on a global scale.

I found myself grappling with the very issues that Ortega y Gasset’s quote only hints upon, during the process of my own translation of a German article regarding young filmmaking students in Berlin. In the fall of 2017, this translation work became a semester-long journey. A *journey* is the best way to describe the art of translation, overall. Each word, sentence, and paragraph, as I transformed the German to English, demanded of me an evaluation of not only my own understanding of language but the moral compass that I demonstrate when it comes to communication. A stepping stone turned into a ladder, which morphed into a series of scaffolds that asked, upon each move forward: Will you please not dislocate or rupture the meaning of me? What do you wish to preserve about me? Where do you stand on the ethics of me? Slowly but surely, words and sentences became paragraphs and pages — all interrogating my method of translation, or, to borrow an image forged by French-born literary critic George Steiner in *After Babylon* (1975), the way in which “meaning [is] brought home captive by the translator.” To this point, coaxed in a dark metaphor involving the kidnapped and the kidnapper, translation is a journey of stumbling around in a shadowy attic. The only sense of a flashlight is your ability to justify “leaving the shell [of an original text] smashed and [its] vital layers stripped,” as Steiner puts it. Your inability to make such justifications will leave you stranded in the dark, surrounded by faded and dusty antiques that are waiting for you to discover them.

Every journey of translation, whether it be a poem, instructional manual for your new Macbook Pro, or a Stephen King novel, begs of you to grab your flashlight and journey into the darkness. Your destination is the creation of a piece of writing that had not existed before, and without your due diligence and intellectual inquisition, would never have come to fruition, and more notably, would never make it into the hands of a reader who may enjoy it, benefit from it, and perhaps even effect positive changes in the world thanks to it. This is a journey whose products line shelves, inform our world views, and inspire us each day. While translation is all too often seen as a purely mechanical operation, I, along with Ortega y Gasset, argue that its “misery” ultimately leads to “splendor” and that it is a journey well worth taking. A journey that is rarely recognized but positively crucial in our everyday perception of the world around us.

Works Cited

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