

On Translation as Exploration: A Conversation with Anna Rusconi

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Back in March of 2020, the Department of World Languages and Literatures (WLL) had a chance to invite a prominent and prolific English-Italian literary translator, Anna Rusconi, for a talk about her own philosophy and approach to the translation process. Maria Barazza, a visiting professor specializing in Latin American literatures, hosted this engaging conversation on translation and its metaphors.



Maria Barazza: Anna, welcome! My first question is: what inspired you to pursue a career in literary translation?

Anna Rusconi: Actually, translation was not my first choice, as I probably lacked the courage to attend an acting school and fell back to something less visible, much less visible. It was still something as creative, something that had to do with words, which I was totally in love with and I still am.

I ended up attending a school for interpreters and translators, and as soon as I came out from school, I started knocking on the doors of the publishers. I was living in Milan, where all the big Italian publishing houses are based. It was 35 years ago, so you could physically open their doors and establish real-life relationships with editors, checkers and other people working there. You could sit right at their desk doing the work together: revising, checking your translations, learning, changing. That has changed a lot. Right now, it's much less poetic and adventurous: everything happens more at a virtual level. You can now do your job wherever you are and you need not be in touch with editors and publishers in-person. Nonetheless, it is convenient, but it's a great loss.

MB: What would you say are the biggest challenges that a literary translator faces and how do you personally deal with them?

AR: First kind of challenges come from the market itself, such as competition, low fees, being systematically forgotten by reviewers, critics, the steady uncertainty of going freelance (e.g. will there be another book after this one?) Thirty five years ago, you could establish a much more direct and personal relationship with the publishers and the checkers; you could work on paper together, seeing your mistakes, learning and exchanging. After the arrival of the email in the beginning of the 90s, you slowly stopped being handed back your checked manuscripts and you worked on PDFs, where you could no longer see the corrections and changes one had made in your text. The process becomes more complicated and impersonal; it's easier for certain things, but more complicated for others.

There are also the challenges that are inherent to the act of translating. These challenges are innumerable and have to do with interpretation, ambiguity, sometimes deliberate ambiguity, sometimes just unintentional ambiguity,

which result in different translation strategies. These strategies are based on style, rhythm, register choices, fine tuning of the voices of the characters and dealing with all kinds of linguistic problems: puns, quotations, intertextual references, jargon, technicalities, accuracy. Due to all these challenges, you have to decide what your translating plan is going to be for that specific book. There are nearly as many strategies as there are books; challenges are not always the same even within the same book.

The literary translator is literally a decision maker. You may think it is a very boring and mechanical job: it is not! It is an adventurous and risky business. You never know what you're going to deal with. There is no handbook you can resort to, only general rules. [You can only resort to] your skill, sensitivity, experience. It's a little bit like being a ship: you know what you're heading forward, you have the knowledge of tools and how to maneuver the ship, but you don't know what the weather will be like, if there will be storms, or how long the trip is going to last. You have to be prepared for anything. You are an explorer, a captain and lots of different things [at the same time].

MB: My next question is central to teaching and studying World Literatures in connection to translation. Who decides what gets translated and why?

AR: The biggest “why” has to do with marketing and sales. Most of the books that you find in bookshops right now, sadly enough, are very commercial books. Publishers are the ones who decide, more and more looking for the gain, pure gain. I'm talking about Italy, as we very much follow the American market. What could be successful on the American market is going to be definitely big and translated in Italy too. Books sometimes get bought after the publishers or agents offer just the first chapters of books-to-be to foreign publishers. This is very dangerous, as you can't really appreciate the whole book. You're betting on the books and what will sell. This is the current trend, but there are also smaller independent publishers who decide on different strategies and target a certain geographical area.

MB: Can you tell us of the authors that you most enjoyed translating? On the contrary, can you tell us of any authors that you had a bit of a problematic relationship with?

AR: I've translated many different authors from different countries, like America, Canada, the UK, Ireland, India, Australia. The English-speaking world is huge, and that is wonderful and scary at the same time because there are so many different cultures pivoting around the same language. As a translator, you're always dealing with two things that do not necessarily always match or overlap: the author and the book. You can love an author and feel incredibly in tune with them, but sometimes you don't really like the book or the way the story is built. And vice versa, there are books that you really love even if you generally don't feel in tune with your author, their style, rhythm, etc. The translator is always a professional and a private reader: the tastes of these two figures don't necessarily agree. This means that as a translator, I can totally be in love with the book that I don't feel particularly attracted to as a reader. On the other hand, I can enjoy reading books that I wouldn't necessarily enjoy translating because of many different reasons.

For example, Alice Munro: she is a wonderful and fascinating author to translate, but her books haven't held me so far as a reader. I really enjoyed translating her because she is so able

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and skillful, but as a reader, I'm not particularly attracted to her. And it's difficult to explain! Szalay is one of my favorite authors. His mother is Canadian and his father is Hungarian, but he was brought up in England and studied at Oxford. I really enjoyed translating him, but I really have no idea what I would think of his books if I was to buy and read them. I'm confused as I'm his translator and not his reader: it's difficult to keep those things separate. Anosh Irani is also worth mentioning. Even in the midst of the most painful and touching scenes, he can conjure up images that are so gentle, exquisite and poetic, emerging with an altogether different cultural and poetic imagination. It creates interesting contrasts, so it is incredibly rewarding to work with such an author.

MB: Since you mentioned Anosh Irani, there is a quote that I wanted to share with everybody. This is from Anosh Irani's latest work: it's called *Translated from the Gibberish*. It says: "I recently had the pleasure of reconnecting with my Italian translator Anna Rusconi. On the topic of translation, she mentioned that she doesn't like to touch the body too much. In other words, [the] translator is not a scientist who examines a text with a scalpel, she simply stands next to the work, really close, feels its breath and understands it as though heat is being exchanged by two people standing very close to each other" (8). So what do you think of that quote in particular and in regards to metaphors to describe the art and craft of translation?

AR: It is always so difficult to talk about translation without resorting to metaphors, as if there was no description or definition of this job sufficing in itself. It always needs to call something else into play in order to define it, to give an idea of what it actually consists of. What is it that we translators do when we sit in front of the pages, one that is already written and the other blank?

Blank is actually a very interesting word. There is a synologist Jean François

Billeter, who speaks about a sort of pre-linguistic blank. Fertile chaos, where the translator lives and works. It is the state of going blank that precedes the utter retrieval of the right word, turn of the phrase. It is where the translator surrenders at the merit of possibilities to the suggestions, the memories. You just listen and perceive with your whole being, with your body. What is the original text saying by means of rhythm, sound, color, texture, temperature? Slowly or sometimes quickly, you move towards something that you feel could be able to produce an equivalent effect in the target language you're working in. This is the place of inspiration.

Fernando Pessoa, one of the greatest Portuguese writers, said: "Without the inspiration, translation is but paraphrasing in a different language." Probably, the main difficulty in defining literary translation is the fact that it is the whole process made of many different stages that have nothing to do with education, skills and expertise, which are fundamental of course, but are not enough. It is a process that has to do also with talent and creativity: it is hard to carry and express all this in just one sentence or even just one book. For instance, think of how you define beauty or the actual state of feeling

beauty. An emotional experience of watching a sunset from a beautiful Mediterranean beach isn't exactly the same as meeting an all-time friend that you haven't seen in ages. Is it the same kind of joy or is it different? How do you describe and define the inherent quality of joy? It's difficult. That's why it has to do with creativity. So, translating is an experience where you have separate

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ingredients, but you have to mix them well and wisely to get a good cake out of it. You know that no recipe ever tastes the same. The recipe is one, but the cakes that come out of one recipe are innumerable, as many as the cooks are.

Maybe I can read some quotes that I'm collecting on my journey of translation.

For instance, Bufalino, a great Sicilian writer, said: “The translator, clearly, is the only one true reader of text, more than any critic and very likely more than the author himself. Because the critic is but the occasional suitor of the text, the author is its father and husband, but the translator is its lover.” This is so nice. Harry Kraus, an Austrian writer, journalist and playwright, also said that “translating a work of the language into a different language means shedding your skin, crossing the border and arriving on the other side, putting on the national costumes.” The problem of translators being traitors is another crucial point. Borges once said it is the original that is unfair to the translation, which is really accurate. Dealing with words is dealing with limits, necessarily and inevitably. Communication is a struggle even in your own language: think of the amount of misunderstanding that happens even at the most basic level of your daily life. So, we can't really say that translation is betrayal. We betray ourselves even when we try to put our thoughts into words.

There is a more interesting question than how and how much I, as a translator, change and betray the original. This other question is: how and how much does that text change me? What does it do to me? What happens to me when I

work with the text? Words get into my system and they establish a relationship with my body and my mind. If all of my system is thoroughly affected by the original, just like any meaningful relationship in real life makes me react and play lots of different roles, then translation awakens the actor, the director, the sound and light engineer, the makeup artist that is in me. As Walt Whitman said, “we contain multitudes,” and I, as a translator, contain multitudes of multitudes. I have an inner theatre staging the original play in me before I translate the same

book into different words. That is why if the book doesn’t change something in me, doesn’t challenge me, it becomes a useless offer, just pure exhaustion, pure drain. I need to feel that what I’m doing is worth doing. The physical exhaustion of these inner rehearsals must translate into good solutions: that’s how I reach the goodness of my words, a sense of rest, of relaxation that it brings to the inner turmoil. The body is important: be in touch with your body, listen and learn how to listen to the words and emotions, because your body will tell you if the solution is good.

Editors’ note: This transcription has been edited for clarity and length.