

reflections

## On Translation: A Practitioner's Experience

by Ali Ahmed

**T**HE necessity of translation arises from the desire of human beings to understand, and be understood by, others speaking a language different from one's own. This attempt at understanding across language barriers may take as widely differing a form as between gesticulation and rendition of the texts of one language into another. This paper, however, will limit itself to a discussion of the conversion of the texts of one language into another, more specifically, the texts on and of literature, and not of other subjects in a language. Although the necessity of literary translation was felt quite early in human civilization, it has often been frowned upon on various grounds. Literary creations were supposed to be the brainwork of 'geniuses' and could not therefore be transferred to another language without really impairing the essence of the 'original'. This at a certain period in history was carried to such an absurd length as to prohibit translation of some texts of religious nature treating both the original text and the language as 'divine' and therefore untranslatable. This untranslatability theory had survived till quite recent times, and the distant murmur of its receding footsteps can still be heard in the horizon.

Translation has nowadays come to occupy an undeniably important position, though not quite the centre-stage, in the study of literature. Even during the last century, when translation was relegated to a very minor and negligible position in literary studies, Madame de Staél, outlining the importance of translation, stated as follows: "The most eminent service one can render to literature, is to transport the masterpieces of the human spirit from one language into another." This undoubtedly is a sound enough reason why literary translation should be undertaken. The alternative is also touched upon by the same author in the following words: "The best way to do without translation, it is true, would be to known all the languages in which the works of the great writers have been written. Greek, Latin, Italian, French, English, Spanish, Portuguese, German; but such a labour would take a lot of time, a lot of help would be needed, and one would never be able to flatter oneself with the thought that knowledge so hard to acquire would be acquired by all and sundry" (Mme de Staél quoted in *Comparative Literature* by Andre Lefevere-PP 189). It would appear even to a casual reader of these lines that for many reasons Madame de Staél's vision of world literature is hopelessly lopsided as she has not taken into consideration some important European literatures like Russian, Dutch, etc, not to speak of major Asian languages, both classical and modern, like Chinese, Sanskrit, Arabic, Persian, Japanese, Bengali, etc. But, while it speaks of Mme de Staél's rather limited vision of the expanse of the world of literature, it doubly proves her thesis, which is, in

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essence, that there is not alternative to translation of literary works of one language into another.

Andre Lefevere, however, raises a very pertinent question. If translation is such a laudable and essential literary work, he asks, why then has it to be defended in the first place? He himself provided an answer to this apparently puzzling question. The answer can be found in the preface to a translation, in French, of complete Shakespeare by François Victor, son of Victor Hugo. The famous French novelist thus says in his preface: "to translate a foreign poet is to add to one's poetry; yet this addition does not please those who profit from it. At least not in the beginning; the first reaction is one of revolt. A language into which another idiom is transposed does what it can to resist. It will find new strength in it later, but for now it is indignant. I abhor that new taste. Those strange locutions, those unexpected patterns, this strange irritation of unknown figures of speech, all that amounts to an invasion. What is going to become of its own literature? What an idea to mix the substance of other people's into its own blood? That's too much poetry. Images are abused, metaphors proliferate, boundaries are violated, cosmopolitan taste is introduced into local taste by force" (Victor Hugo as quoted in Andre Lefevere-pp C190).

I take help of this rather lengthy quotation because it more or less brings into sharp focus the state of the matter of literary translation. Introduction of a new text (and culture) into another literature through translation, indeed, creates as stir, to begin with, because it threatens the existing way of life and, more importantly, the thought — pattern of the culture into which a new translation is introduced. But, finally, it gets enriched through accumulation and absorption of not only newer and innovative types of language patterns but also novel ideas, thoughts, and often innovative literary forms. Translation thus appears to work in literature as Hegelian thesis works in social progress.

But there is another school of thought that speaks of soft-pedalling this resistance and confrontation of the native culture against introduction of translated, alien literature. Le Tournier, the French translator of Young's *Night Thoughts*, states that, "It has been my intention to draw out of the English Young a French Young who would be pleasing to my country, and who would be read with interest, so much so that readers would no longer ask whether they are reading an original or a copy". Le Tournier goes on to argue that the translated literature may be superior in merit but not in taste, and therefore the best way of translated literature may be superior in merit but not

in taste, and therefore the best way of translation, in his opinion, would be to appropriate the best that is in the neighbour's culture leaving out what is bad there, or what is distasteful to the translating literature. This view on translation should, in my opinion, be carefully examined as it opens a very wide scope to the translator to leave out what, in his own opinion, is 'offensive' to the taste of the readers in the translating literature, because it endows on him the right to edit or mutilate the text of the translated literature. The question that would naturally arise at this stage is whether or not a translator, any translator, has the right to edit, mutilate, or change a text, or a portion of it, in the translated literature.

The German writer and critic Johann Gottfried Herder has come down heavily on Le Tournier: "the French, who are overproud of their national taste, adapt all things to it, rather than to try to adapt themselves to the taste of another time. Homer must enter France a captive, and dress according to fashion, so as not to offend their eyes." Johann Herder goes on further with Homer and states that according to Le Tournier, the old Bard has to change his old, simple cloths for the latest French fashion, etc. There is, no doubt, a clear anti-French rhetoric in what Herder says in these lines, but his basic thesis that change and mutilation of the original in translation is not permissible deserves all consideration.

The above controversy between French Le Tournier and German Johann Gottfried brings us face to face with the question of probable types of translation found in the field of literature. Here, the Englishman John Dryden indicated three: First, metaphor, where one converts a text word for word and line by line into another language; second, paraphrase, where one does not strictly adhere to the worlds of the other text, but generally keeps the sense in view; and, third, imitation (in the Horatian sense), where one is not bound either by the words, or the sense of the other text, but borrows, adapts and varies 'general hints from the original' as one pleases. Bower suggests that parody, which Dr Johnson defined as 'a kind of writing in which the worlds of an author or his thoughts as taken and by a slight change adapted to some new purpose', can also be viewed as a mode of translation.

Be that as it may, the word translation, or its French, German or Spanish counterparts, only commit us, after all, to carrying something across from one language, one text, one form of words to another. We know, this has more or less always been the case between literatures in the civilized worlds to another. We know, this has more or less always been the case between literatures in the

lized world. But what we do not always remember is that translation has always already 'introduced new concepts, new genres, new devices, and [that] the history of ----- the shaping power of one culture upon another' (Bassnett and Lefevere 1990: IX as quoted in *Postcolonial Theory by Eve Tavor Bannet*, pp 165). Translation therefore cannot be treated as a single, isolated, marginal and clearly delimited, activity. This also brings to the fore the question of the role and status of the translator. In the 19th and earlier 20th century, a myth was constructed about the invisibility and instrumentality of the translator, and transparency of his text. But there cannot be translation without a translator to give signs of from another language and another text.

There are two ways of thinking this survival of one text, one voice, one signature, in another, both of which have been employed by Derrida. In the first, the translating text is considered as a space in which at least two language, two texts, two writers are bound together. One aspect of this binding together of texts is described by Gary Aylesworth when he says that, "Treated 'deconstructively' translation is not completely distinguishable from its original text and vice versa. Thus translation includes a moment of 'undecidability' of the same order as 'deconstructive reading'" (Silverman and Aylesworth, 1990 : 164). It simply means that when reading a translating text, one cannot always be sure just whose voice, translator or source writer, one is hearing at any given moment.

The second way of thinking the survival of one text in another is to think in terms of the relation between two envelopes and two acts of communication. As Barbara Godard explains, translation is then concerned as a relation between two text systems: Author-Text-Receiver and translator-Text-Receiver. Here the translator is neither marginalised nor confused with the author. He is seen to be no less the producer of an utterance than the author since he is the originator of a distinct and separate act of communication; and there is what Meschonnic calls a 'decentering' of the source text as the focus shifts to the textual relation between two texts, two language-cultures. Seen a little differently, as done by Douglas Robinson, translation is, 'a transaction involving three people, two speaking different languages, a third speaking both.'

The experience of the author as a translator of quite a few renowned foreign writers into his native language, Bangla, has driven home to him the truth of what has just been stated above.

The author has translated and published, in Bangla, a couple of shorter novels by the Egyptian Nobel Laureate, Naguib Mahfouz. The author does not know enough Arabic to translate the books from their original language and had to rely on their English translation. The question of ultimate Bangla translation's divergence from the original Arabic apart, the author has since gained some experience which might as well be shared with others. Egypt and Bangladesh are both third world countries, at one time in their existence both had been colonised by Britain, both have many common social practices, etc. Translation between their two literatures should therefore face less obstacles than for the same between the literatures of, say, France and Bangladesh. And it was really so. But still, there has been some interesting experience to the author. The river Nile in Egypt is traditionally called 'Nil Nada' instead of the normal 'Nil Nadi' in Bangla. While translating this, the author had thought that the normal 'Nadi' instead of 'Nada' should be used, and he did so. It was later objected to by critics. Again, in the English version, there are in many places, expressions like 'call to the morning prayers' or 'call to noon prayers', etc. The translator had to think that the characters being Muslims, 'call to morning prayers' has a specific expression in Arabic language called 'Azan' for Fazar prayers which, incidentally, is similar in Bangladesh. So, a literal translation of the English version has been avoided, and a cultural translation has been made in its place. But a similar thing could not be done while translating Gabriel García Márquez's *Of Love and Other Demons* in Bangla, because this latter novel relates to a seventeenth century colonised Colombia in Latin America with a different history and religion. Even the version of Christianity, Catholicism, then as well as now prevalent in Colombia is different in many of its rites and rituals from the version, Protestantism, we got to know first through colonization of the sub-continent by Britain, an overwhelmingly Protestant country. So, most of the rites and rituals mentioned in that novel had to be translated as proper names with necessary notes in parentheses, or footnotes, where necessary. What I am trying to establish by mentioning these two ritually similar but culturally different situations in two different texts in original and the same translating literature is that the translator has to use the best of his judgement while doing his job, because he is translating not only a text of one language into another but also introducing, at times, new cultural concepts in as best an intelligible manner as possible. While doing all these things, making texts intelligible

to the target group, and 'betraying' the original author where unavoidable, the translator must not forget the commitment of loyalty and fidelity to the translated text and its author for reasons mentioned earlier. A conscientious and responsible translator's work therefore is not an easy sailing in fair weather, but a tight-rope walking with burning fires below. A translation is therefore not the 'best' that might be, for that were an idle desire for any man that is now alive, but I would have a skilful translation, that might be known and understood' (*John of Trevisa*). A translation therefore is neither good nor bad, but skilful and adequate, which conforms to the modern standard of equivalence.

One post-publication experience is worth sharing with the audience/readers. It was then a couple of months since my first translation of Naguib Mahfouz had been published. That, incidentally, was the first translation of Naguib Mahfouz in Bangla language, both in Bangladesh and in West Bengal or Tripura states of India. Naguib Mahfouz being a third world novelist, the first Arab and African to win the Nobel Prize for literature, generated a lot of interest in the literature — loving sections of the people in Afro-Asian countries, of which Bangladesh forms a part. Probably for that reason, and maybe for some others, the translation of Naguib Mahfouz had won quite a good number of very favourable reviews and quite encouraging sales, considering our very limited market for literary books. In the backdrop of this, I was one day being introduced by a poet to another poet-editor of the country as Mahfouz's translator. After the initial exchange of pleasantries, the poet-editor I was being introduced to gave expression to his unconcealed surprise at seeing me. He had thought, he said, that the translator of the Arab novelist would be someone with long, flowing beard and traditional Arabian dress. It might be mentioned here that in Bangladesh, with the majority of her population being Muslims, Arabic has an undertone of religious association, and people somehow or other being connected to Arabic, would generally be deemed to be old-fashioned and conservative. Even a very progressive writer like Naguib Mahfouz, who had physically been attacked by religious fanatics, could not escape this association. Nor could his humble translator, albeit by a single individual and that, too, only initially. But when he got to know me better, the poet-editor very bluntly said, 'you could have translated some other writers.'

This is one problem with the translator. Nicolas Perrot d'Ablancourt, the French translator of Lucian had this to say: "this translation of mine can be attacked for two reasons, namely for what I wanted to achieve with it, and how I tried to achieve it. For some people will say the I should not have translated this author, and others will say that I should have translated him differently."

So, that is the ultimate fate of every translator, successful or otherwise.

profile

## Paul Morand — the Excited Melancholic

by Wilma Levy

everything I received from it brought me luck."

When young Paul failed the baccalaureat higher school certificate the first time, he was given a tutor and it was Jean Giraudoux. He then passed the exam successfully and a great friendship developed between them: "a brother who was one of the great enhancers of my life", Morand was to say later. After studying at the prestigious Political Sciences School and spending a year at Oxford, and leading a golden, sporting and frivolous life, Paul Morand came first in the competitive examination of the Embassies and was appointed to London where Paul Cambon was the ambassador at the time. Good luck also spared him from fighting on the front in 1914 and he often stayed in Paris and frequented Paris society circles. In 1921, Marcel Proust agreed to write the preface to *Tendres Stocks*, which were his first portraits of women: "Paul Morand's style is certainly unusual. This new writer is generally rather tiring to read and difficult to understand because he links things by establishing a new kind of relationship between them." And Louis-Ferdinand Céline did not hesitate to declare: "I acknowledge him as my master". At 30, he was famous.

In the Twenties, Paul Morand, who

*Paul Morand's life is like a novel. Eighteen years after his death, two young writers, Pascal Louvrier and Eric Canal-Forgues, made no mistake about that and present a lively, alert biography in which Morand appears freed of his legend of being a superficial, hurried man, but in which his incapacity for happiness comes out at least as strongly as his insolent success.*

was Cocteau's friend and an admirer of St-John-Perse, found himself in the centre of a brilliant society which was hastening on towards its end. After the poems of *Lampes à Arc et Feuilles de Température* (1919 and 1920), Morand wrote novels: *Ouvert la Nuit* (1922), *Ferme La Nuit* (1923), *Lewis et Irene* (1924), etc. His writing suddenly became revolutionary. His characters joined together and broke apart at a giddy pace, before disappearing, suffocated by their contradictions. This poet, writer, diplomat and fulfilled author, who was fond of speed, tirelessly travelled the world: London, of course, but also Venice, New York, Spain, Africa, Asia, Bangkok, Japan, Scandinavia, Germany, Turkey, etc. From his years of travelling, he drew many texts which were often short stories. These include *L'Europe Galante*, *Rien que la Terre*,

say: "I am a sea famous for shipwrecks. Passion, folly, drama... everything is there, but everything is hidden". He was, without doubt, confiding autobiographical details here. One of his tales, *Hecate et ses chiens* was, moreover, in the Fifties, to depict sensual and psychological submissiveness to woman, which leads a man to mental distress. In the Thirties, space and travel no longer sufficed. His cosmopolitan period was over. He was more interested in the early works of Sigmund Freud, the master of Vienna, and the depths of the human soul were to fascinate him from then on.

Morand, who wanted to remain detached, fearing becoming the prisoner of any commitment, was then won over by Pierre Laval. His wife urged him to leave London in 1940, (whereas he was later to admit that he had been rather tempted to remain there), and to commit himself to the Vichy government. He finally accepted the post of ambassador in Bucharest and then in Berne in 1943-1944. But luck was no longer with him. He had made the wrong choice and History caught up with him. On the Liberation, he was revoked without any allowance and forced into exile in Switzerland. After a dozen gloomy years, when he managed to live thanks solely to his short stories, he slowly

started to regain his celebrity thanks to Roger Nimier, whom he gradually came to consider as his spiritual son. Little by little, he returned to the limelight and, after De Gaulle lifted his banishment, after a tough struggle he managed to gain a place in the Académie Française that Hélène had, above all, desired for him. When he was received into the Académie, on 21st March 1969, this writer, who had been practically dead and buried for 25 years, felt as if he was returning to life.

But the new Academian was not to remain in this world for much longer. Paul Morand, the fragile man, preyed on by doubts, anguished by the rapid passing of time and haunted by the decadence of the European civilisation, only outlived his wife by a year and passed away in 1976. In the cemetery in Trieste, his ashes were mingled with those of Hélène so that those whom life had never separated would remain united for eternity. "The excited melancholic", as the journalist Jean-Louis Bory was to describe him, left us his culture and his life's ambition which was nothing less than integrating, into his work, the modernity of a century, revolutionized by the supersonic aircraft and the atom bomb.