

On Translation: An Interview with Jessica Cohen

KN: Walter Benjamin writes in “The Task of the Translator” that the central task of translation is to express the “reciprocal relationship between languages.”¹ Because each language can be understood as a relational framework structured around an underlying intention or mode of signification, the translator does not strive to reproduce the original work in a new language; rather, she finds in the language into which she is translating those words and sentences which give voice to the intention of the original work in the form of an echo.

You recently translated a series of essays by David Grossman, including “Books that Have Read Me,” and are in the process of translating his most recent novel: *Isha Borachat Mi’Besora*. Grossman writes that all of his books are preoccupied by the “arbitrariness of an external force that violently invades the life of one person, one soul.”² Each of his books: *See Under: Love*, *The Smile of the Lamb*, *The Yellow Wind*, and *The Book of Intimate Grammar*, tries to describe more precisely “the relationship between the individual soul and this external arbitrariness”³ (DG 14). Grossman believes that this creative endeavor enables the author not to be a victim of things that seem to be unalterable. Benjamin would perhaps say that this preoccupation with the effects of an arbitrary force on an individual life or soul is the intention underlying Grossman’s use of language.

Can I ask you to reflect on your practice as a translator and consider whether you agree that translation essentially involves the attempt to transmit an author’s underlying intention or mode of signification? If so, how does this aim affect the elements of your composition: your choice of words and tone of voice, the structure of your sentences?

JC: I have always found that there is something of a chasm between translation theorists and practitioners (although there are a few individuals who straddle both worlds). Observing translation (the process and the results) from afar, from above, or from a historical perspective, it certainly is possible to see it as an attempt to express the “reciprocal relationship between languages.” As a practicing translator, however, I would define my task far more prosaically: my job (and it is a job, although fortunately an enjoyable one) is to make a work in one language (in my case, Hebrew) available to readers of another language (English), who would not otherwise be able to enjoy it, learn from it, laugh at it, get angry at it, quote from it, share it, and all the other things we do with the books we read. But I do like Benjamin’s notion of translation as an echo, and I find it an apt metaphor in many ways: for those who hear both the initial voice (the original work) and the echo (the translation), it is impossible not to be aware of the fact that the latter is only that—an echo. That it lacks, perhaps, the volume and nuances of the original sound. But with a good translation, the hope is that those who hear only the echo (i.e. read only the translation) are only dimly aware of it being anything less than the original. The reader of a work in translation usually knows that it is translated (and I strongly object to the tendency of some publishers and booksellers to try and obscure this fact, as though it is somehow an embarrassing shortcoming or a commercial obstacle), but not having read the original, they are, ideally, satisfied with the translation to the point where the fact that it is a translation (an echo) is virtually forgotten.

As to how these ideas inform my actual translation work, I suppose they do in some unconscious way that may be discernable after the fact. But when I sit down to translate a text—whether a 600-page novel or a 1000-word story—my primary focus is on finding an elegant way to convey the original Hebrew voice in my English translation. In this I include the narrator’s voice, the characters’ voices, and the “voices” of all the other elements that make up a text: place, time, cultural references, historical events and so forth. The

¹ Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator,” in *Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zohn and edited by Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 72.

² David Grossman, “Books That Have Read Me,” in *Writing in the Dark*, translated by Jessica Cohen (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), 13.

³ *Ibid.*, 14.

voice of the author is also present, of course, although my own tendency is to try and glean as much as I possibly can from the text itself, without resorting to explication from the author. Obviously I do send the author many questions in the course of my work, but they are more along the lines of “Is it significant that you used X word, rather than the more conventional Y word?” or “On page X, line Y, could you explain why so-and-so says such-and-such?” I cannot recall ever having queried an author as to his or her underlying intention, except inasmuch as it might relate to a very specific word or passage. I generally feel, particularly with a work of fiction, that once we have the text in our hands—and by “we” I mean readers, interpreters, translators—its “meaning” or “intention” is bound to come across in a particular way, regardless of what the author may have intended. It is then my task to carry over that meaning, that intent, that *voice*, as I hear it, to the readers of the translated work. I do, however, feel a greater responsibility towards authorial intent when I am translating a work of non-fiction, and in those cases I often pose more fundamental questions about what exactly the author is trying to say.

KN: I am intrigued by one of your parenthetical remarks. You say that you object to the tendency of some publishers and booksellers to try and obscure the fact that a book we are reading is translated, “as though [this] is somehow an embarrassing shortcoming or a commercial obstacle.” What do you think might lead us to think of translation as a shortcoming? And how do you understand the kind of writing that you do as it compares to the writing of an original author? Let me follow these two questions with a third one: you mention that you feel a greater sense of responsibility towards authorial intent when you are translating a work of non-fiction; can I ask you to explain why? At first blush, a work of non-fiction has less to do with authorial intent than with the appropriate transmission of facts.

JC: My remark about obscuring the fact that translations are translations stems from the prevalent marketing approach of most publishers in the U.S.: the translator’s name rarely appears on the book cover or in the book’s publicity materials, and, consequently, is often omitted from book reviews. Many publishers, editors and booksellers have stated quite explicitly that translations are hard to sell, and that if consumers know that a book is translated from another language, they are less likely to buy it. I am not in the book-selling business and I have not seen the market research to support this claim—perhaps it exists. But even if it does, this seems to me like a “chicken and egg” situation: if publishers and booksellers continue to perpetuate the notion that translations are somehow inherently inferior to the original works, or more difficult to read than works originally written in English, then the idea will continue to be cemented in readers’ minds. (I should note that there are several notable exceptions to this trend, in the form of small, independent and/or non-profit publishers, some specializing in translations, who are respectful and appreciative of translators and do a fantastic job of promoting their translated books as exactly that.) It is difficult to deny that on some fundamental level a translation is never quite equal to the original work. Translators, myself included, often lament the inevitable frustrations of their endeavors: at some point, in almost every text, a translator will come across a term or a concept that simply cannot be adequately conveyed in the target language (the language into which the text is being translated). There are various “workarounds” for these impossibilities of translation, some more elegant than others, but ultimately it is true that some things just can’t make that trip across languages, across cultures. This truism, and the fact that most translators are very open about it, might have contributed to the commonly held notion that translations are inferior to the original—that a translation is a shortcoming. But I find that hard to accept. For one thing, a good translator should be able to compensate for the “untranslatables” in other parts of the text. For example, if I am unable to find a good translation for a pun or a word-play in a particular line, I will try to substitute one in a different line (upon consultation with the author, of course), thereby preserving the tone of the original. Furthermore, the truth is that the only person who is aware of these “untranslatables” is usually the translator herself! (And in some cases the author, an editor, perhaps a few colleagues with whom the translator has shared her quandaries, and in rare cases a reader or reviewer who compares the original side-by-side with the translation). Most readers of the translation won’t see these shortcomings, and as long as the translation is generally readable, true to the tone and intent of the original, and provides them with a reading experience similar to that of the original work’s readers, there is no shortcoming to be aware of. And finally, if we were to take the argument that translations are inferior to originals to its logical conclusion—namely, that we should therefore stop reading them—it would be a very sad conclusion indeed. Who of us would want to limit our reading material to texts written only in the one (or sometimes two or three) languages in which we can read proficiently?

As to your second question, it brings to mind something I am often asked, which is whether I write (or want to write) my own original work. I always answer without any hesitation that I don't, and this response often elicits a surprised look. I then add, only half-jokingly: Why would I write my own work when I can piggy-back on other people's writing? It is true that many translators are themselves writers (and when it comes to translators of poetry, I think there are very few who are not poets themselves), but I personally do not have the urge to write, to give voice to something inside of me, which seems to be at the core of what drives writers to write. For various autobiographical and other reasons, I arrived at translation out of a desire to bridge the two halves of my identity—the English one and the Hebrew one. That is my core; that is what drives me. And I try to express it by channeling the voices of Hebrew writers into the English language.

Your third question relates to the difference between translating fiction and non-fiction. In my initial response, I made a comment that was not sufficiently explained. I was recalling (somewhat inaccurately, or at least incompletely) something I had read a long time ago, from an essay by my colleague Haim Watzman, a prolific and superb translator of Hebrew who concentrates mostly on non-fiction. According to Watzman, "a fundamental axiom of the translation of non-fiction is that the translator has to get the writer's message across clearly, and sometimes that demands certain changes in the text — in its style, in its choice of words, sometimes even in its contents." (I highly recommend reading the full piece, which can be found on Watzman's website: <http://southjerusalem.com/haim-watzman/haim-watzman-translation/>.) At first this statement surprised me, because it does initially seem counter-intuitive: surely translating a novel necessitates far more creative liberties than translating a history book? But I believe Watzman has in fact articulated a very simple truth, which might be phrased more bluntly the following way: fiction is voice; non-fiction is content. Obviously this is a huge over-simplification, but I think it's a helpful way to consider the different modes of translation. Clearly, a good work of non-fiction is good not only because of what it is saying but because of how it is said (an encyclopedia entry is not the same as an essay in the *New Yorker*), but the bottom line is that the translator's fidelity must be to *what the author is trying to say*, even if that means saying it in a different way in the translation. Not so with fiction, where the voice, the tone, the music, the imagery, the style—all of the "hows"—are arguably more important than the "whats"—plot, setting, and so forth. When I translate a novel or a short story, I feel at liberty to carry my own interpretation and impressions into my translation, within reason of course. Conversely, when translating non-fiction it would certainly be possible for me—the translator, the reader—to misunderstand or misinterpret some aspect of the text, and I am therefore far more likely to ask the author for clarifications translating non-fiction.

KN: You mention that the desire to bridge the English and Hebrew halves of your identity was what first led you to translation. For many of us who have similarly fragmented identities, living in the Diaspora includes the hope or at least the longing for return to a homeland. Yet perhaps the practice of translation can teach us that in order to be at home in the world it is enough to accept that division and the desire for unity partly define our humanity; if so, the task of building bridges—between different aspects of our own identity, between ourselves and others, or between different languages—is one we should be willing to welcome. For our last question, I want to ask you whether you think the practice of translation can help us understand how to create and sustain a coherent sense of selfhood. And if I may ask the question in less general terms, does the practice of translation satisfy the desire that first led you to it?

The short and simple answer is, No, the practice of translation has not satisfied the desire to bridge the two parts of my identity in any absolute way. Partly, this is because that desire did not originate as a motivation that I consciously understood or even perceived, but rather emerged as a background when I began to consider why I had found myself engaged in translation. But primarily it is because this duality of identities is inherently unresolvable. Those of us who live with more than one linguistic, cultural, national or ethnic background know that none of them can ever truly "win out." We learn to tolerate, or ideally embrace, this plurality, and live with the nagging sense of dissatisfaction and frustration. In that regard, my dual existence is analogous to the act of translation itself: rarely am I ever completely satisfied with a translation I have done, because there are always those words or concepts I was unable to adequately convey in the translation in all their full layers of meaning. Similarly, there are aspects of my identity that cannot successfully cross over from one culture to the other. Certain things about my "Israeliness" are left

behind in Israel, to be picked up whenever I visit, and certain parts of me that are rooted in my British origins or in my adopted American culture do not travel well into my Israeli life.

Despite the conflicts, the frustrations, and the underlying struggles of living with an identity composed of multiple backgrounds and cultures, I believe these difficulties are outweighed by the advantages. Although I don't feel entirely at home in any one of "my" countries, I find that I am able to feel a similar sense of partial belonging in almost every place I visit. Rather than dwell on the strangeness and incompleteness of my connection with my surroundings—on what gets lost in translation, to revert to the age-old cliché—I prefer to think of what is gained in these transitions: the ability to see other cultures and find in them something if not familiar, then at least approachable.

I am reminded of an essay in David Grossman's *Writing in the Dark*, which I translated. In "The Desire to be Gisella," Grossman contemplates one of his primary motivations as a writer, which is the desire to explore and understand "the Other" through writing. I find his ideas resonant of my own thoughts about why I pursue translation. From the essay:

Perhaps our attempt to avoid being fully exposed to the Other is not so different from the efforts we make—almost inadvertently—to resist being tempted by all the varied "others" within each of us. To keep from crumbling into all the options of existence and the internal temptations, all the forking paths within us.

[...] What is interesting to discover is that at those rare moments when I manage to make this wish come true and reach that "core" of the Other, it is then that I—the writer—do not have a sense of losing myself, or of being assimilated into this particular Other about whom I have written, but rather I have a more lucid perception of "the otherness of the Other," of the differentiation of this Other from myself. There is a sharp and mature sense of something I might call "the principle of Otherness."

Applying a similar line of thought to translation, one might say that, as a bilingual translator, I am attempting not so much to bridge or reconcile the two components of my identity, but to give voice to them both, perhaps in order to better understand and acknowledge each one. Translation is the ultimate act of seeing one artifact from multiple perspectives. A translator must first be able to read the text in the same way (or, more often, in the multiple ways) in which it was perceived and comprehended by readers of the original language, and subsequently to draw it into the vantage point of the target-language readers. These two experiences—that of the original work's readers and that of the translation's readers—will never be identical, but a good translation should aspire to reconcile the two as much as possible. As someone who has been engaged in various acts of translation all my life (long before I became "a translator"), it is second nature for me to apply both facets of my identity to virtually every text I read. When I read a Hebrew book, even if I am just reading for pleasure or interest and know I will never be translating it, I nonetheless sense a running commentary in English in the back of my mind, like ghostly subtitles, and I often stop to consider more consciously how I might translate a particular phrase into English. Conversely, and even though I do not generally translate literature from English into Hebrew, I often find myself pondering how an English text might work, or not, in Hebrew. This constant background noise allows me to maintain, through language, a plurality of perspectives that can be noisy and distracting at times, but which offers, I believe, a richer and more open way of seeing the world and myself in it.

Questions by Karin Nisenbaum