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Translation Plus: On Literary Translation and Creative Writing

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Abstract

How do the disciplines of translation studies and creative writing relate in an institutional setting or in current practice more broadly? What role does translation play in the creative writing workshop or classroom, especially for students writing in English as a second language? What benefits are there in the interchange? What can translation add? The article considers these questions in a wide-ranging discussion of writing processes that recognize translation as both a constraint and a highly elastic and enabling concept. Reference is made to writers such as Juan Pablo Villalobos, Ben Lerner and Merlinda Bobis whose work is thematically concerned with issues of translation, and the author's own novel, *The Red Thread*, which adapts a Chinese text, as well as pedagogical experiments in creative writing involving literary texts from languages other than English. This contributes to an argument that translation is an integral part of contemporary creative practice in a world characterized by mobility, multiplicity and transculturalism.

Did she say Ivanhoe?

All around those parts is where the man lived who was right meat for her.

A long time ago it must be, they took a fancy to one another.

I suppose she's getting an old woman now.

My epigraph comes from Tamsin Donaldson's essay "Translating Oral Literature: Aboriginal Song Texts" and is her version of a Ngiyambaa song from Western New South Wales that "was composed by the late Jack King, father of Archie King, the lone survivor of those who were 'made men' in 1914", by going through the last initiation ceremonies held in their country (Donaldson 64). Her essay "offers a sprinkling of examples from an extensive oral literature whose full range remains unknown, and [which is...] for the most part disappearing" (63). Her "'translations', in the sense developed here" are scrupulous, and also creative, and survive as a resource for later learners of, and creators in, Ngiyambaa.

I dedicate what follows to Tamsin Donaldson (1939-2014), linguist, translator, scholar and friend.

Translation *and*. Translation *plus*¹

Translation adds value, bringing other creators and creations into being, in ways that reflect the mobility and multiplicity of our world. If we are experienced students of literature in the twenty-first century, we welcome the opportunity translation gives us to read in this way, with inquiring criticality and a theoretical toolbox to match, excited by the extra steps that come with translational reading and writing, as measures of how far we have travelled. The

¹ I'm grateful to the Australian Association for Literary Translation (AALITRA) for the invitation to speak at the forum called "Translation and..." held in Melbourne in November 2013. This article enlarges on that presentation.

adding may be a kind of stripping away, too. *Hubad*, “translation” in Cebuano, one of the languages of the Philippines, for example, connotes undressing. Translation reveals.

In the creative practice that seeks to express and critique the world in new ways, illuminating its better potential, there is almost always a process of translation, where translators are called on to be collaborators and commentators, interpreting and exposing others and self. I wish to focus specifically here on the “and” that happens when creative writing combines with literary translation, but this is just one case of what occurs in the world at large when the practice of translation is folded into other callings, as David Bellos observes in his well-informed and witty discussion of contemporary translation, *Is That a Fish in Your Ear?*, where he considers the “lawyer-linguists” of the European Court of Justice and the “journalist-translators” of the wire services: “in the work of many international organizations, no precise boundary can be drawn between translation, on the one hand, and drafting [...] a text [...] on the other” (Bellos 245). We’re all clerks.

How, then, does it work? If we accept that literary translation is a form of creative practice, how do the disciplines of translation studies and creative writing relate to each other in an institutional setting? Literary translators work with other languages, but so, often, do creative writers. Sometimes literary translators are members of authors’ associations, sometimes they have their own association. Sometimes they are eligible for literary grants and prizes, sometimes the rules are different, as are the terms and conditions for their work. In academia, where the literary translator is often a teacher and scholar in area studies, a work of translation struggles for recognition unless its “research component” is demonstrable through its scholarly apparatus or its classification as a “non-traditional research output” (to use Australian Research Council language), a creative piece in its own right. These arguments reflect the tightrope that translators walk, a similar high wire to the creative writer’s.

In terms of recognition and remuneration, literary translators struggle. The “and” that joins their work to creative writing can be helpful, as Brian Nelson and Rita Wilson argue strategically:

Translation still elicits widespread distrust or disregard. In recent years, however, there has been increasing recognition of the creativity of translation. Translation is rightly seen as a form of writing (or, more precisely, re-writing) just as all writing, however original, involves processes that are a kind of translation. [...] The activity of the writer and that of the translator are indivisible.

(Nelson and Wilson 35, 38)

The argument for literary translation as creative practice has more often been made by the translator than the creative writer. It is sometimes presented as a new phenomenon (which it’s not), as if to recognize a response to a new kind of situation. New writing emerges in contemporary contexts that are unprecedented – writers work from their own unique experiences and perspectives – and the expanded zone that translation marks is indeed part of that, especially now, in the twenty-first century. It’s linguistic, but also personal and cultural, familial, migratory, hybrid, heterogeneous. As Nelson and Wilson put it:

Translation denotes not only the art and craft of the “literary” or “professional/technical” translator, but also a larger cultural formation that emerges through the global flow of migrants and refugees.

(Nelson and Wilson 41)

That makes it worthwhile to ask what creative writers, in particular, can get from literary translation. Which aspects of translation are relevant to the workshop where writers develop their craft and vision? Literary history shows that writers who translate find an “elective affinity” in what they translate that emerges as a formative presence in their own work, both in style and content: Dryden translating Virgil, Eliot Mallarmé, or Pound with classical Chinese poetry, Elizabeth Bishop translating Carlos Drummond de Andrade. Many of the best writers are sometime translators, and the best translators are valued for what their words give us: good writing.

Translation doesn’t exist in isolation. It is always a turning from one thing to another, a doubling partnership between languages and between writers and writing roles, including the role of reader. Translation is available for more than one relationship or form of transmission too, open to variants, always provisional. The apparent singularity of a final version is deceptive. Sometimes we can read between the lines, hear echoes, read back. Creative writing is like that too, in different ways.

As the medium for world literature, translation is an active participant in emergent writing and cultural exchange, allowing us to cross borders, to go beyond our boundaries, to hear those stories we would otherwise miss. Those other stories that extend, challenge and overturn what we know.

“And Other Stories” happens to be the name of a new UK press whose mission is to publish “the types of stories” that other publishers “would consider too risky to take on”: a collaborative undertaking that creates its own community through a subscriber model. New translations of contemporary literature make up a defining part of And Other Stories’ list. That the publishers of literary translation are so often small, non-mainstream and innovative, committed to literary values in an interventionist way, is part of this other story too. A restless curiosity and desire to destabilize the institutions and conventions of literature, in a spirit of lively experiment, appreciative receptiveness and reciprocal hospitality, make the business of translation an engine of generation: a means of entry to unknown spaces, where you break out and break in.

And Other Stories has joined with the *London Review of Books* World Literature Series for translation master classes and events, including with Juan Pablo Villalobos, the Mexican author of *Down the Rabbit Hole* (2011) and *Quesadillas* (2012), both translated into English by Rosalind Harvey. Villalobos is himself a sometime translator, from Brazilian Portuguese into Spanish; Harvey honed her practice through a Master’s in Literary Translation from the University of East Anglia, renowned for its creative writing pedagogy. Here literary translation joins with creative writing and new literary flows in energizing, elliptical curves. Born in 1973, Villalobos is one of the contemporary writers who foreground translation as a way of presenting a polyglot, polyvalent world that both demands and resists interpretation. *Down the Rabbit Hole* is a miniature novel narrated by a young Mexican boy whose father is a drug lord. The kid is called Tochtli, the word for “rabbit” in Nahuatl, Mexico’s main indigenous language. His father is called Yolcaut, “rattlesnake”. But the boy’s teacher, Mazatzin, which means “deer”, admires Japanese culture and prefers to call the boy Usagi, Japanese for “rabbit”, instead of his Nahuatl name. The naming of characters is unsettling in this Spanish-language novel, like everything in the child’s terrible, traumatic world. The author scrutinizes language as part of the interpretative inquiry that gives this work its highly distinctive texture. Tochtli says:

Some people say I’m precocious. They say it mainly because they think I know difficult words for a little boy. Some of the difficult words I know are: sordid, disastrous, immaculate, pathetic and devastating. [...] What happens is I have a

trick, like magicians who pull rabbits out of hats, except I pull words out of the dictionary.

(Villalobos 3)

The translator's title for the novel, *Down the Rabbit Hole*, overlays the Spanish original, *Fiesta en la madriguera*, preparing us for a literary work in which the child's intelligence regarding absurd, disorientating experience turns the adult world on its head. We go down the hole and through the glass like Alice, in a cultural approximation that reminds us where we're not. Nahuatl, Japanese, Spanish, English: language asymmetry for a world without equity or justice.

"Where does the story begin?" asks Merlinda Bobis in her novel *The Solemn Lantern Maker* (172). From the mute lantern maker of the title, a boy called Noland, to the corrupt senator, the war-damaged American officer, the police, the journalists, and a street kid called Elvis who cares what happens to Noland more than he cares what happens to himself, the author weaves together lives that intersect in dreams, fears, conspiracies and the actions that each takes for the sake of survival. In dealing with dark material, Bobis stays on the side of the light, heeding Italo Calvino's advice in *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, where he notes that "to cut off Medusa's head without being turned to stone, Perseus supports himself on the very lightest of things, the winds and the clouds, and fixes his gaze upon what can be revealed only by indirect vision, an image caught in a mirror" (Calvino 4). In *The Solemn Lantern Maker* the most terrible things are presented through the crisscrossing voices and fantastic imaginings of children and the dispossessed, and through an interplay of languages: "How easy for one query to bear the weight of a life, of many lives – the one asked about, the one asking, the one asked to ask who finds himself unwittingly owning the question, owning the lost one" (Bobis 160). The book shines like the star-shaped lanterns Noland makes. Noland. No land. Named for the loss of land. Part of the sparkle comes from words of vernacular Tagalog that betoken loss and resilience, as people seek redress for impunity. The novel continues the trajectory of Bobis's work in mobilizing multiple linguistic resources (English, Pilipino, Bikol) in pursuit of impactful creative truth.²

Merlinda Bobis teaches creative writing at the University of Wollongong and it's no surprise that creative writing programs such as at Wollongong, or at Adelaide, where I teach, and in many other places, should be receptive to the kind of writerly experiment that an engagement with linguistic plurality can bring. If creative writing programs have been accused of producing the creative writing novel, we are now beginning to see the emergence of the *translation plus* creative writing novel. One fascinating example is *Leaving the Atocha Station* (2011) by Ben Lerner. The author is a graduate of and teacher in writing programs in the United States and his book is published by an independent non-profit literary publisher there called Coffee House Press. It comes with garlands from John Ashbery – the title borrows the title of one of his poems – and has garnered good reviews at home and abroad. What's it about? A poet from a writing program who has a fellowship in Madrid to remix Lorca in a creative translational response based on minimal Spanish and just being there. It's funny, always scrutinizing its own dubious integrity, or fraudulent audacity, and the transgression of limits, against the knowledge – mostly out of frame – of the terrorist bombing of the actual Atocha station on 11 March 2004.

Here's the narrator's account of his creative practice as literary translator:

From the Prado I would typically walk to a small café called El Rincón where I'd eat a sandwich. [...] Then I'd walk a few blocks more to El Retiro, the city's

² For further discussion, see Giffard-Foret.

central park, find a bench, take out my notebooks, the pocket dictionary, Lorca, and get high.

If the sun were out and I proportioned the hash and tobacco correctly, if there were other people around, but at a distance, so that I could hear that they were speaking without hearing in which language, a small wave of euphoria would break over me. [...] I had the endless day, months and months of endless days, and yet my return date bounded this sense of boundlessness, kept it from becoming threatening. I would begin to feel a rush of what I considered love, first for the things at hand: the swifts, if that's what they were, hopping in the dust, the avenues of old-world trees, [...] the park's artificial lake. [...]

On these days I worked on what I called translation. I opened the Lorca more or less at random, transcribed the English recto onto a page of my first notebook, and began to make changes, replacing a word with whatever word I first associated with it and/or scrambling the order of the lines, and then I made whatever changes these changes suggested to me. Or I looked up the Spanish word for the English word I wanted to replace, and then replaced that word with an English word that approximated its sound ("under the arc of the sky" became "Under the arc of the cielo," which became "Under the arc of the cello"). I then braided fragments of the prose I kept in my second notebook with the translations I had thus produced ("Under the arc of the cello / I open the Lorca at random," and so on).

But if there were no sun and the proportioning was off, if there were either too many people around or if the park was empty, an abyss opened up inside me as I smoked. Now the afternoon was boundless in a terrifying way. [...] It was worse than having a sinking feeling; I *was* a sinking feeling [...]. It was like failing to have awoken at the right point in a nightmare; now you had to live in it [...]. He, if I can put it that way, had felt this as a child when they sent him to camp; his heart seemed at once to race and stop. Then his breath caught, flattened, shattered; as though a window had broken at thirty thousand feet, there was a sudden vacuum [...] and he was at a loss; he became a symptom of himself.

(Lerner 14-17)

In this passage translation provides the structure and the process that enables the narrator to write. His practice – a kind of combinatorial algorithm – is, for all its randomness, a safety net, and on the days when it is not there, he is overwhelmed. He loses himself in the endless possibilities of his own consciousness, the contradictions, the fragmentation, the schizophrenia, unable to give any of it the necessary form that writing requires – except that in a further contradictory twist he has just produced a brilliant riff on personality collapse in which he recreates his first-person narrator as a third-person character, a fiction-making capacity arising from the anxiety of constraint not kicking in.

The narrator here reminds me of Lambert Strether in Henry James's novel *The Ambassadors*. Strether too hovers over the void of purposelessness, once he is set loose from his American frame of value in the differently calibrated morality of Paris. His response is to take to heart his own injunction "to live all you can", even if it means permitting a kind of chaos of selfhood. In plainer words, the exercise of translation here in Lerner's novel permits a degree of risk-taking that is creatively enabling for the narrator. As translation enters the very texture of his embodied self-reflexiveness, he becomes a poet/novelist rather than any sort of reliable translator. The creative practice devours the translation process that gives birth to it.

For many writers and artists translation means a plus in this way. It can be there as influence, exercise, borrowing or theft, an undertone, a shadow, a presence from elsewhere that reveals the work as exceeding its bounds, or understating its claims. This happens across art forms too, where translation can be understood as an attempt to transpose language into another communicative medium, such as music or visual art. A written text can be inspiration or source. The American composer Charles Ives, for instance, takes the writing of Emerson as a starting point in several of his works, notably *The Unanswered Question* (1908), which has a phrase from Emerson's poem "The Sphinx" as its title. Ives's composition gives idiosyncratic musical expression to a transcendental worldview he recognizes in Emerson, using techniques of adaptive assemblage to do so. Emerson's philosophical question is thus answered in a way that is no answer, since it doesn't meet the original in language. The paradoxical answer comes in a form that is performable but not translatable back.

In no less radical and confounding a manner, the contemporary Chinese artist Xu Bing makes art out of interventions in text at a foundational level, re-scripting Chinese writing in his mind-bending *A Book from the Sky* (*Tianshu*) (1988) and the more playful *Square Word Calligraphy* (1994) where he re-designs English words to look like Chinese. In both cases he alludes to the double seeing, and sometimes blindness, that can occur when we look cross-culturally.

In *Piano Lessons* (2012), pianist Anna Goldsworthy writes about music in a way that finds verbal equivalences for both the music itself and her experience of playing it as she develops the personal understanding that will result in a performance that effectively, physically, communicates an interpretation. In her "Liszt" chapter, Goldsworthy writes of the self-discovery that accompanied her encounter with Liszt's *Rigoletto* paraphrase, the discovery of seduction as the necessary extra, the artist's art. Transcription, several times over, becomes a way to achieve expressive self-realization.

Yet a dedicated translator might not be comfortable with such uses of the term "translation". Carefree, self-serving, irresponsible might be more critical descriptions of the open-endedness of the processes I am indicating, where translational practices feed other creative effects but abandon the translator's contract with his/her silent partners to reproduce the meaning of the original in another form. There may be grey areas and play areas, but in recognizing literary translation as a kind of creative practice, we need to look more carefully at what, from a translator's point of view, but not a creative writer's, are the limits.

David Bellos takes a strong position in this debate. He wants to "beat the bounds" of what translation can mean, drawing a line at extension beyond the linguistic. However entertaining the result, should musical transcription, ekphrasis, stage or screen adaptation, transcoding or rewriting be included under the umbrella of translation (Bellos 310-14)? While there may be good, stringent reasons for delimiting the usage, in practice the genie has escaped from the bottle, which suits our genre-bending cultural moment with its mash-ups, remixes and zombie Jane Austens. The objection to letting translation refer to other kinds of transformation is based in linguistic philosophy privileging the word over the image and the alphabet over the ideogram in a Western and logocentric way. A reflection on Chinese writing-painting, where text and image are integral aspects of one expression, or Australian Aboriginal storytelling, where song maps on to marks on the body or the ground, suggests the need for a more encompassing concept, where interplay between different modes is given space to occur. Alexis Wright describes how:

contemporary Indigenous storytelling has a visual, descriptive form in the way its stories are told. However, the written form is also visual in that it looks something like a spinning multi-stranded helix of stories. This is the condition of contemporary Indigenous storytelling that [...] is a consequence of our racial

diaspora in Australia. The helix of divided strands is forever moving, entwining all stories together, just like a lyrebird is capable of singing several tunes at once.
(Wright 84)

While translation can be defined in terms of the constraints under which the translator works, those constraints can change in response to different situations, as becomes apparent when the impulse to translate oneself takes a creative form. In her essay “Parallel Creations: Between Self-translation and the Translation of the Self”, in a collection called *Creative Constraints: Translation and Authorship*, co-edited with Leah Gerber, Rita Wilson considers translingual writings that “establish a dialogic process between the culture of origin and the host culture” in an attempt “to encompass both the ‘original’ and the re-located cultural-linguistic self” (Wilson 48-9). Such writing arises with unprecedented global flows: “Increased migration and the consequent increase in horizontal language acquisition gave rise to a new polyphonic linguistic and literary reality in the twentieth century” (48n). This is only accelerating in the twenty-first, and it is part of our global citizenship to recognize it hospitably.

Andrea Hirata’s novel *The Rainbow Troops (Laskar Pelangi)* appeared on the world stage in response to a new need-to-know attitude to Indonesia, as the country underwent its dynamic and testing democratization. It’s the story of a group of island kids who fight to save their local school in the face of pressure on all sides. It’s a charming book that could not have achieved its domestic welcome, selling an estimated 15 million copies, in an earlier, more restrictive phase of Indonesia’s political culture. It’s a celebratory book, and the English version has been popular too. As English readers, we’re grateful to the translation, and to the publisher who took a chance on it. Hirata speaks enough English to have retold his Bahasa story to his translator in English, who then, with the help of editors, polished it up, as translator Angie Kilbane explains.³ The result has an oral, tale-telling immediacy that is almost raw, quite a lot of repetition and circularity, and an eclectic mix of vocabulary and register, especially around things we, as foreign readers, are assumed not to know – about Islamic education, for example, or the names of local plants, or folklore. The many Bahasa terms foreignize this world but also take us there, to our near neighbour, for me, writing as an Australian. In this case, though the translation would get a thorough going-over in a translation workshop, it doesn’t matter that it wasn’t all ironed out. *The Rainbow Troops* moves most people to tears anyway.

Creative Constraints incorporates reports on workshops that bring the author into the room to work with translators on a version of a new text. If the editor is there too, it highlights the many decisions that can be made in seeking to produce the best possible rendering. These days in the case of translation into English the author may be able to translate her own text into English, and may have difficulty accepting the decisions made by translator and editor, in a further consequence of our new linguistic reality. This was the topic in a case study of a translation from Arabic in an editing workshop organized by the British Centre for Literary Translation (BCLT), where the question of who must finally take responsibility for a translation as published came into sharp focus. The BCLT’s translation workshop model has been adapted widely, including in China, India and Indonesia. In the case of China, writing and translation have traditionally been quite separate activities, giving the translator free rein, unencumbered by the author of the original. The BCLT workshop model changes this, helping translators see that a text’s original author, the creative writer, may have something useful to offer in the process. It was a surprise to see creative writing workshops introduced alongside translation workshops at this year’s Chinese English Literary

³ See <http://andrea-hirata.com/note-from-angie-kilbane-the-rainbow-troops-translator/> (accessed 30 April 2015).

Translation summer school at Huangshan. The move recognizes the scope for improving the quality of translations in both directions by improving the quality of the translators' skills as writers, which is not about their knowledge of the target language but how they use it.

A more radical workshop happened at BCLT's summer translation summit at the University of East Anglia, where bird song was played and translators were asked to find verbal equivalents.⁴ Birds have always inspired poets, as kindred songsters, from the cuckoo that brought summer a-coming in to the ospreys that cry in one of China's oldest love poems. To translate the language of the birds is a challenge and a constraint of another kind, into the post-human. The exercise is relevant to the question of how you might begin to translate a poem from a language you don't understand, once that desire comes upon you.

My focus on process reflects the educational and developmental context of creative writing programs where the emphasis is on what methods can best encourage new writing to emerge. Much of the new energy around translation in relation to creative writing occurs in situations where people are trying to extend their skills, often through collaborative, interdisciplinary and transnational modes, within the structured, but experimental space of the university. The folding of translational practice into creative writing, and into literary studies more generally, and inter-art collaboration too, is part of a recalibration of the creative arts in a more mobile, global field. It requires exploratory classroom practice, pedagogy and research, as new, transcultural knowledges are constructed and critiqued. Such practice connects with inquiry into the nature and limits of the literary in a world where communication is increasingly interactive, taking place in strings of responses and counter-responses, across languages and media, in digital form, though never only virtual.

The example from Ben Lerner suggests what is possible for writers in combining creative practice with translational processes. It is easily imagined as a classroom exercise. There are other similar models. In an essay on "Writing Asian Poetry in English" that appeared in *Mascara*, I mention experiments in adopting foreign poetic forms into English for students who do not know the source language – haiku, tanka, sijo. The question is what makes the crossing along with the form, of a cultural or conceptual kind, linguistic, but extra-linguistic too. It's a question that can be asked of English-language transcription, adaptation or appropriation of Indigenous poetic modes, as Stuart Cooke describes in *Speaking the Earth's Languages: A Theory for Australian-Chilean Postcolonial Poetics* (2013), calling them "performances *in themselves* [...] in which both settler and indigenous peoples have played crucial roles" (Cooke xx).⁵

I've had fun in a master class with students who collectively had a rich array of other-language expertise, but did not have the one other language in common. We attempted a translation of a poem, which became a rewriting, a remix, an improvisation, as expectations and constraints shifted. In the case of Chinese I recommend *A Little Primer of Tu Fu* where the great translator David Hawkes opens up different ways to approach some classical Chinese poems. He gives the Chinese characters and their *pinyin* romanization, a short contextual discussion, a word for word, line by line gloss, and a prose paraphrase that allows a non-Chinese reader to understand how meaning is made. From there students can go on to read other translations of these famous poems and express an opinion: "this works better for me than that", "this is more interesting", "this has more appeal", "I can do more with this than that".⁶ For Urdu, V.G. Kiernan's *Poems from Iqbal* (1955) is recommended.

⁴ Conducted by poetry translator Sasha Dugdale.

<http://www.poetryschool.com/courses-workshops/face-to-face/from-birdsong-to-translation.php> (accessed 30 April 2015)

⁵ See also <http://cordite.org.au/reviews/jose-cooke/> (accessed 30 April 2015).

⁶ For further discussion, see Jose, "Compost and Pollination", esp. 15-18.

Such simple exercises can be introduced into the laboratory of the creative classroom at any stage. They have special appeal as the creative writing classroom itself travels, and as English-language creative writing courses are taken by more and more second-language students, who are making English their language of choice as writers. By partnering with universities elsewhere that are developing their own creative writing programs in English, where English is a “second language”, such as the University of Stockholm and Renmin University in Beijing, to name just two, there is an opportunity to participate in adapting models that began in the Anglosphere into other linguistic, cultural and social contexts. In *Exploring Second Language Creative Writing: Beyond Babel*, Dan Disney observes that this “emergent [...] field remains largely unsupported by interdisciplinary theoretical discourses” (55). The collection he has edited reports on a range of classroom experiments around the world where, for other language speakers who are translating themselves into English, “the English language is viewed as a space of possibility and emergence” (as Eddie Tay describes his practice as a creative writing teacher in Hong Kong) (Disney 103). Another relevant example, where the multilingual nature of transnational creativity was highlighted, is the Transnational Creatives workshop organized by Bath Spa University with the University of Stockholm’s Department of English for partners in the Global Academy of Liberal Arts (GALA) in Sweden in August 2014.

Translation has always been a necessary agent in the transmission of new ideas. In the crossing from one cultural situation to another, knowledge and understanding are created or changed. That is the urgency, prestige and scrutiny that attach to translation. Tolstoy’s ideas were sought in translation ahead of his novels, for example, as Rosamund Bartlett points out, *The Kingdom of God is Within You* was being read in English “within months of its completion in 1893”, including “in South Africa by a young Indian lawyer called Mohandas Gandhi” (Bartlett 7). For early twentieth-century Chinese intellectuals translation of foreign texts was the way in which new thinking could be facilitated – through potent, adaptive translations of works such as Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* or Rabindranath Tagore’s Gitanjali poems, as well as Marx and Freud. “Some of the greatest writers of the time devoted themselves to the task of translation, introducing a diverse range of Western, Japanese and Soviet literature”, including for film adaptation (Jaivin 36). Such “translingual practice”, as Lydia Liu terms it in her book of that title, played a key role in China’s modernity in the Republican period and again in the “open door” years after 1979. Fou Lei’s translation of French Nobel literature laureate Romain Rolland’s novel *Jean Christophe* in 1936-41 was still influential a generation later, on those who endured the Cultural Revolution and became committed to an opposing “heroic struggle in the name of art” (Roberts 38-9).

Translation can still work this way in China, as literary scholar Lu Jiande reminds us. At the China-Australia Literary Forum in Beijing in 2013 he spoke of the impact on Chinese intellectuals of J. M. Coetzee’s work, noting the way new kinds of thinking were introduced through Coetzee’s novels – specifically, with the example of *Disgrace*, in terms of relations between humans and animals. “All experience requires scrutiny and examination”, so Chinese author Li Er encapsulates what he has learned from reading Coetzee in Chinese (n.p.).

Anglophone intellectuals should not find that strange. So much of our conceptual apparatus has been delivered through translation – of Barthes, Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze and Guattari, Agamben and other leading continental philosophers in recent decades, replete with linguistic adaptations and neologisms: aporia, rhizome and so on. The translators of such texts become their interpreters and advocates: Brian Massumi for Deleuze and Guattari, for example, and Gayatri Spivak for Derrida. Their introductions, notes and additional material become part of the larger effort to convey meaning. Readers of such texts become as expert

in the theory of literature as with literature itself. The translator's mediation replaces the original with a substitute reading experience.

The most widely cited text *on* translation is itself routinely quoted *in* translation, usually without any acknowledgement that a return to the original might produce changed meanings. A telling exception is Stephen Rendall's note accompanying the reprint of Harry Zorn's 1968 translation of the iconic essay to which I refer, Walter Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator", where it appears in *The Translation Studies Reader*, edited by Lawrence Venuti.

All this only goes to show that people look to translation for a power to change things, creative writers as much as anyone.

In my own practice as a writer I have turned to translation as a medium for my own creative exploration of the expression of feelings and ideas, including aesthetic ideas, across cultures. You'll notice from my formulation that I am blurring the feelings a person might have when interacting deeply with a person from another place with the experience of transmission between one culture and another on a larger level. This is what happens when I write about China, which has attracted me as a creative subject since I first visited in 1983, or even before that in my imagination. It has been a long journey now and I have spent a great deal of time with China one way or another. When I came to write my third novel on a Chinese subject, I wanted to go deeper, to move away from the structure of encounter, with its ready inscription of an East-West binary, towards something more like immersion: as fish and water. The way I did so was through the intermediary of a book. In this case it was an unusual and cherished Chinese book called *Six Chapters of a Floating Life*, written by a man called Shen Fu in 1808 but not published until 1877, without its last two chapters. It's a memoir of the life of a loving couple that ends suddenly and tragically, and also enigmatically, since only four of its chapters are extant. To complicate things it appears that the author's pages were mixed up on the way to publication, so what we have is to an extent disorderly and incoherent: non-linear and fragmentary, to use aesthetic terms from our time. This patched text was beautifully translated into English by the great Chinese writer-translator Lin Yutang and published in Shanghai in 1935-6. Lin helped the book travel by his praise of Yun, its heroine, in an essay in his best-selling *The Importance of Living*, published in New York in 1937 after he moved to the United States. He calls Yun "the most beautiful woman in Chinese literature" (Lin 311).

My novel begins in Shanghai in 2000, when it appears that the two missing chapters of the old book have been found. The text exerts a strange power over a young Chinese man who works at the auction house where they are to be sold. He comes to believe he and his foreign girlfriend are living out the life of Shen Fu and his wife, reincarnated in the transforming world of a new China. It becomes imperative to know how the story ends, and whether the two missing chapters are real or fake. In my novel, which is called *The Red Thread*, the lovers' past lives are experienced through Lin Yutang's slightly archaic translation of the original, which I re-assemble and extend, as it comes to overlap with the present. Part of the effect is to allow the transmission of the qualities by which Shen Fu and Yun live their lives in a world where old, broken things could be found and valued, in intimate remembered moments.

Here's a passage, printed in red in my book, that represents my translation of Lin Yutang's translation into a changed imaginative context that allows its meaning to resonate in a new way:

Yun had a peculiar fondness for old books and broken slips of painting. [...] When she saw scrolls of calligraphy or painting that were partly torn, she would find some old paper and paste them together nicely, and ask me to fill up the

broken spaces. Then she would roll them up and label them “Beautiful Gleanings”.

[...] Once I said to her, “It is a pity that you were born a woman. If you were a man, we could travel together and visit all the great mountains and the famous places throughout the country.”

“Oh, this is not so very difficult,” said Yun. “Wait till my hair has gone grey. Even if I cannot accompany you to the Five Sacred Mountains, then we can travel to the nearer places, as far south as the West Lake and as far north as Yangzhou.”

“Of course this is all right,” I said, “except that I am afraid when you are grey-haired, you will be too old to travel.”

“If I can’t do it in this life,” she replied, “then I shall do it in the next.”

(Jose, *The Red Thread*, 225-6)

That becomes the prompt for a novel that is both a homage to a text from another language and a transmission of its ideas, aesthetic qualities and emotional landscape into contemporary English-language fiction.

In my recent book, called *Bapo* (2014), published by Giramondo, another small publisher that likes translation, I take this a little further. It is a series of short prose fictions, some of them quite essayistic in manner. The title is a Chinese term. *Bā* means “eight”, *pò* means “worn” or “broken”. When worn, burnt or broken things are assembled into a kind of collage, as depicted illusionistically by a painter, it’s given the – relatively obscure – name *bāpò*. Ever since I first heard of this concept, I have envisaged it as a kind of writing, where fragments, prismatic perspectives, and an aesthetic of incompleteness, ongoing-ness and re-assembly, could be applied to express the complex shades of an experience of China over many years, and of those who have moved through, or in and out of, a changing China, and a changing outside world, specifically Australia, as it relates to China: a condition of mobility and fluidity that eludes final meaning.

For me that is signed by a title which is taken over directly rather than translated. Potential readers will interpret it in a speculative way before they open the book, where it is explained in an introduction. It’s a risky business to give a book a foreign language title, though I’m by no means the first to do so. Fellini got away with it for his great movie, known universally as *La Strada*. Gregory David Roberts did it with his bestselling novel of India, *Shantaram* (2003), and Miguel Syjuco chose a loaded Spanish word for the title of his novel of the Philippines, *Ilustrado* (2010). As did Timothy Doyle in *Dyandi*, a word for “to the last drop of blood”, the sacred oath from their creation song that marks the B’laan commitment to saving their environment.

I don’t want to put people off with *Bapo* as a title. I hope it will beckon people to the multiple, prompting them, as it did me, to take a step beyond what we already know. That foreign word, untranslated, can be an open sesame.

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