



## The Translation Workshop

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The Translation Workshop began in the US in the 1960s, and has become associated with translation in the US, particularly in the sixties and seventies. Important names in the area are Frederic Will, who became director of the Translation Workshop at the University of Iowa in 1964, Daniel Weissbort, also from the University of Iowa, who founded *Modern Poetry in Translation*. Other important names include Edwin Honig, Edmund Keeley at Iowa and then Princeton, and Frederick (Fritz) Hensey at the University of Texas.

What are the characteristics of the Translation Workshop? Translators, poets and students of translation or literature, with varying degrees of foreign language knowledge, will follow a workshop style course to work on the final versions of literary pieces, usually poems, under the supervision of a leader who will usually be a poet and translator. Each of the participants will work on his or her particular poet or poem(s). The resulting semi-ready versions will be presented to the group and the supervisor, who will offer suggestions for the final version. The norm is that a large number of foreign languages will be worked with, each student translating into English from his or her own language. An example of the many workshops that Daniel Weissbort ran was a workshop in India, where Indian translators came together produce final versions of poems that had been translated into English from various languages, including Hindi, Tamil, Bengali, Kanada, Urdu. The role of Weissbort, the supervisor, was then to lead discussions on the different versions and to help the participants to produce their final versions, which were then published.

I believe that much of the popularity of translated poetry in the US in the last decades comes from the popularity of translation workshops. They have given visibility to translation, they have brought poets and translators together. They have managed to publish many of the final results. But, I believe, at a certain cost.

One of the main reasons why Translation Workshops have been so popular is that they have cut across languages and have not been directed to those with a deep knowledge of source and target language. In the Indian workshop the participants generally did not know each other's first language, and Daniel Weissbort, the workshop leader, certainly did not know any of the languages.

Another form the Translation Workshop may take is for translators/poets to work from a crib or a pony, i.e., a word-for-word prose translation from a "difficult" language, made by an expert in that language. The participants will then use their skill to "poeticize" the crib and each will produce a different version of the original. The aim of the leader of the workshop, if it is run on a class or course system, is to help the members with the final poetical form and shape of their translation.

Some of the advantages of this kind of translation are very obvious. One can be an "instant" translator from an exotic language. One no longer needs to spend half a lifetime

sweating over that language. One does after all have only one life. All that one needs is a friend or colleague who knows the appropriate language and who will do one a favor.

Thus the emphasis of the poetic translation moves away from the ability of the knower of languages, the philologist or the linguist, who will produce an accurate but maybe unpoetic translation, to the poet, who may not know the language, but who will produce a so-called “poetic”, a fluent, translation.

I would like to suggest other reasons behind the success of the Translation Workshop:

- i) An interest in the foreign and exotic in the US in the 1960s, when the Translation Workshops began
- ii) Since then the increase in immigration from Spanish speaking countries;
- iii) Also the increase in immigration from non-traditional centers, i.e., Asia, in the seventies and eighties, resulting in new languages spoken in the US, in which there is curiosity in certain circles;
- iv) Growing interest in making literature from Native American languages known to a wider audience in the US;
- v) Growing number of literary translation prizes and grants to translators from the PEN American Center, and also grants to literary translators from the National Translation Center under the Ford Foundation, the Columbia-PEN Translation Center, the Ingram Merrill Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities.
- vi) The appearance of journals devoted to translations: *Micromegas*, *Delos*, *The Translation Review*, *Translation*, and *Modern Poetry in Translation*
- vii) Yet at the same time no increase in the number of Americans learning foreign languages. The use of cribs seemed an easy way to overcome this problem;
- viii) The example of Ezra Pound, who, in his *Cathay* translations, used the notes left by Edward Fennellosa, to produce poems which gained international acclaim. Pound also translated from he did not have a perfect command of. His translation of the Anglo-Saxon anonymous poem, *The Seafarer*, has been criticized for its inaccuracies. However, a larger number of critics have praised it for remaining close to the original in spirit, despite certain errors. Thus the poet-translator may have an advantage over the philologist-translator.
- ix) The success of Pound’s translations, or at least his freer translations, allowed the translator more freedom. He could now imitate, as Robert Lowell did in his *Imitations*. Colloquial, slangy language was now accepted, as in Dudley Fitts’ translations, most of which are from classical languages into a very American idiom. Once translated poetry was taken into the domain of the poet-translator, the emphasis was on the fluent version, the translation that became a poem. Thus errors of translation were tolerated, or rather, they were seldom discovered, as translations made by poet translators were not read by linguists and philologists. Indeed, as *Modern Poetry in Translation* only publishes the English language versions, spotting errors needs a considerable amount of work.
- x) Growth in Translation Studies and interest in translation throughout the world, with more courses, publications and conferences, thus providing a market for translations;

- xi) Schemes such as Translation Workshops are a good way to attract students to commercially-minded universities, where it is hardly financially viable to provide experts in the wide of range of languages which are worked with.

“The Golden Crane Anthology of Translation” translation workshop took a somewhat different form. This experiment was carried out through the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa. A “kit” was sent to a number of relatively well known translators of poetry. This kit contained i) a crib of the Chinese poem T’sui Hao “Yellow Crane Pavillion”; ii) a line translation of the same poem; iii) notes on the original form, the Chinese language in which it was written and the legend behind the poem; iv) a copy of the original poem (three of the participants knew Chinese; v) a brief covering letter, requesting a translation from the crib.

The organizers of the experiment were so delighted with the results of the experiment that they resulted in an article in *Modern Poetry in Translation* which described the experiment and which was followed by 32 of the translations.

The solution that Angela Elston suggests closely follows Pound, or at least one type of the several kinds of translation that Pound produced. In his translations of Confucius Pound’s translations of the Chinese followed certain types of English idiom. Poem 187 reproduced hillbilly language; Poem 145 sounded somewhat Elizabethan; Poem 117 seemed an attempt to recreate a Negro spiritual. Angela Elston chooses blues for the model of her version:

#### CAUSE MAN

Once that brown crane flies  
He’s gone

And some long slow cloudbanks draws a thousand years cross  
That empty sky

#### THE LIGHT

‘s real clear on the river  
you can see the bayoo trees  
just as plain  
with that sweet smellin’  
grass  
on parrot island

Angela Elston’s article published two Notes to the translations made, which give us an idea of contrasting reactions to the project. The first is from Keith Bosley from England, a widely published literary translator, especially well-known for his translations of Mallarmé, who believed that to “call it a ‘translation Kit’ and cite Pound is vulgar.” This kind of translation workshop has brought translation within the reach of everyman, and Bosley seems somewhat bewildered by this American massification of translation, which seems to him to be child’s play:

Do they have painting by numbers in the US of A? This is a board on which outlines are drawn ready with each space numbered: all you have to do is to slap on the correspondingly-numbered paints from the palette provided. The present exercise smells somewhat of this, with the suggestion of every man his own Pound. But Pound is not an example: he's the exception, the only bloke who made a resounding success of this very inadequate – though common – approach, precisely because he was a genius. I'm all for democracy, but art ain't democratic. (Elston:23)

Ironically, some of the beneficiaries of this “democratization” of the translation process were the 16 and 17 year-old pupils of Peter Jay at Sevenoaks School, England. Feeling that his class needed more information to go ahead, Jay co-opted the help of a Chinese speaking Hong Kong boy. This contact gave Jay and his class the relationship of “trust and instinctive understanding of each other's language habits” which he felt necessary to get deeper into the poem. In addition to three versions by Jay, there is also a translation from Chris Maynard, one of Jay's students.

The Translation Workshop attempts to be untheoretical. Edmund Keeley, in his closing address to the 1980 Literary Translators Association stated: “I have not exactly banned translation theory from my workshop, but I have tried to keep it in the far corner of the room, from where it emerges only when there is urgent need” (Keeley 1981:7). The Workshop assumes that there is an essence to the poem that can be maintained in the translation and which can be transported through the crib and into English: “A crib never pretends to reproduce the form of the original, but it will give us the content through which we may see the meaning.” And working from a crib may have advantages over working from the original as “it has already done some of the work for us by separating that which is translatable from that which is not”. Attempting formal equivalence, even if we know the original language, is not encouraged: “If we knew the original, we could imitate certain of its formal features using the resources of the target language, but this is a difficult and dangerous procedure. There is no assurance that a certain aspect of the form – the repetition of sound pairs in close proximity, for example – will have anything like a similar effect in the target language. And it is possible to end up with a translation that imitates the surface of the original faithfully, but misses the depth.” (Elston:16).

There is no questioning of the difficulty of translating terms and world views from languages with totally different cultures into English. Languages are seen as transparent, and the humanistic philosophy underlying the Translation Workshop sees all cultures as having the same human core of moral interests and decisions, regardless of race or language. *The Golden Crane* reflects certain of these universals: the passing of time and the transience of human life; the beauty of nature; and sadness and loneliness.

Edwin Gentzler, in *Contemporary Translation Theories*, describes Frederic Will's account of his trip to Hungary, in which he worked with another poet on a number of poems by Gyula Illyes. Despite his lack of knowledge of Hungarian and Hungarian literature, he considered the translations of Illyes' poems already made into English poor

because they did not “feel” like English poetry. According to Gentzler, “Will’s approach is very subjective and ultimately determined by the power of poetry. He is able to “feel behind the translation and the original to some ideal form of the poem as part of that ideal body of literature. Because he belongs to that privileged class of poet and translator, because he enjoys the power of “love”, he believes he can overcome his specific ignorance of the language in question as well as its indeterminate normal use, and gain access to that “essence behind the poem” (Gentzler:32).

Yet perhaps the greatest use of the Translation Workshop is not specifically for translators and linguists but rather for creative writing in English as it gives a set of guidelines, the foreign text, to help discipline potential writers, and, through the already translated text, to give the writer possibilities to extend his or her own range of themes.

### Bibliography

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