

Between the Lines

Joanne B. Mulcahy



Morning light filled the kitchen window the August dawn that I turned the final page of my cloth-bound library book. I hadn't wanted the story to end. By habit, I went back to the first line, not knowing then that "All happy families are alike..." was among the most famous in literature. But it was the small print on the title page of *Anna Karenina* that stopped me. For the first time, I noticed "translated by Constance Garnett." Other life-changing novels filled the summer of my sixteenth year, books I devoured after waitress shifts at the Mari Nay Diner: Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, Knut Hamsun's *Hunger*, and Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*. Each had invited me across boundaries of language and culture. But until that summer morning, I had failed to realize my debt to the person who'd shaped the invitation.

Anna Karenina was not just the story of passion and regret, family and duty, the sweeping landscape of Russian life. It was also the story of Garnett, the grande dame of 19th and 20th Century Russian literary translation. The path to my rapturous experience of the novel was paved by painstaking work. The translator was a heroine as important as Kitty or Anna herself. I imagined Garnett holding pen and dictionary, writing, crossing out, searching for the parallel word, the most harmonious syntax. What emerged was something entirely new yet faithful to Tolstoy. Garnett's hand had parted great waters, crossed languages and continents to create an Anna that lived on the page for an American teenager.

Reading novels was not my first experience with foreign languages or translation. The Catholic mass was a form of travel into exotic terrain. I remember the sound of "Kyrie eléison" rising from behind the altar screen, saturating the church. I knew nothing of the Romans who kept this Greek prayer of petition even after adopting Latin as their vernacular language. I didn't know that the "Alleluia" we sang was Hebrew. But the idioms

of the mass instilled a deep sense of wonder. The swish of the priests' satin vestments, the swirling smoke and musky scent of incense—these were my first links between unknown languages and mystery.

Though our family of eight was hardly well traveled or international, there were cracks in the seal of our parochial world. When I was in fifth grade at St. Ursula's, Sister Mary Ferguson began rolling a television into the classroom once a week. A French woman named Helène filled the screen. She wore a sky blue dress cinched tight at the waist and black heels far higher than the pumps my mother donned on rare Saturday nights out. Helène beckoned us to repeat "s'il vous plait" and "merci," her rouged lips puckered into voluptuous invitation. Was Helène someone's mother? Did children in a faraway country have their own version of "please" to get what they wanted for dessert? Streams of words, meanings, the mixed-up pleasure of knowing and not knowing, all merged to create the sense that Helène's words were magically like ours and yet different.

Helène arrived the same year that the reforms of Vatican II shook the Catholic Church. I must have been nine or ten when the priests at St. Ursula's began saying mass in English. I remember that moment when "Kyrie eléison" became "Lord have mercy." The chanted phrase seemed drained of power, the surrender to mystery gone. Or were they? "Eléison" with its drawn-out vowels and soft ending felt as familiar as skin. But now the word "mercy," elegant and bending, enveloped me. I realized that words could stay rooted even as they crossed the bridge of another language. Still, it didn't occur to me to ask who had built the bridge. I didn't sense a human hand.

If the mystery of other languages was first love, translation became the longer, more enduring partner—the one you can live with after the storms of passion pass. I continued to study French in high school and college, then Russian and Spanish. I struggled to read in original

languages, dictionary in hand. But how many languages and literatures can one master in a lifetime? Of the six thousand languages in the world, perhaps 1,000 are written. Who could possibly access such diverse stories, poems, and other literary forms? For cross-cultural literature addicts, limits arise.

In her 2010 book, *Why Translation Matters*, Edith Grossman, award-winning translator of *Don Quixote* as well as the work of Mario Vargas Llosa and Gabriel García Márquez, writes:

...translation expands our ability to explore through literature the thoughts and feelings of people from another society or another time. It permits us to savor the transformation of the foreign into the familiar and for a brief time to live outside our own skins, our own perceptions and misconceptions. It expands and deepens our world, our consciousness, in countless, indescribable ways. (14)

Given the profound impact of translation, why is the translator's name written in such small script? Why are translators ignored in book reviews, if books in translation even warrant reviews?

Translators weren't always so neglected or maligned, Grossman notes. Before and during the Renaissance, translation was a valued part of life. Multilingual collaborators brought Greek, Latin, and Hebrew texts into modern vernacular European languages, often via Arabic. Translators ruptured their own sealed worlds to contribute to collective knowledge.

Grossman cites multiple reasons for contemporary attitudes, among them corporate control of publishing, a lack of understanding and respect for translation, and a view of the work as derivative or worse, a betrayal. Perhaps, as translator Gregory Rabassa notes, we've embraced the Italian saying—"traduttore,

traditore"—"translator, traitor." We mistrust the person who stands on the cusp, willing to risk the perilous crossing between languages and cultures.

The Russian poet Joseph Brodsky leveled this accusation against Constance Garnett: "The reason English-speaking readers can barely tell the difference between Tolstoy and Dostoevsky is that they aren't reading the prose of either one. They're reading Constance Garnett." But reading Garnett along with Tolstoy and Dostoevsky reflects no flaw. Translators are in fact writers. Grossman tells of teaching García Márquez's *The Autumn of the Patriarch* in a seminar. A student asked if they were reading Gregory Rabassa or García Márquez. Grossman writes, "My first, unthinking response was 'Rabassa, of course,' and then a beat later, I added, 'and García Márquez.'"

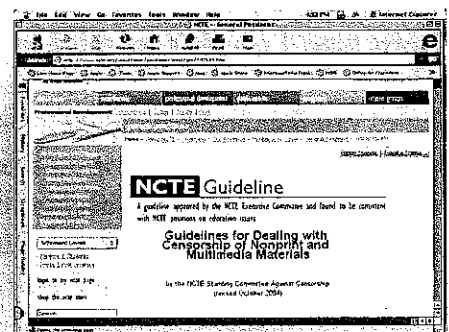
The best translations transcend the literal to create new versions of novels, poems, and other literary works. In "The Task of the Translator," the German writer and critic Walter Benjamin suggests that the essence of literature is not "the imparting of information." As readers, we are after something deeper. The translator must be a writer, Benjamin argues, in order to reproduce what readers everywhere crave: "the unfathomable, the mysterious, the 'poetic.'"

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How can we create greater access to world literature for U.S. readers? The statistics in the English-speaking world don't seem promising. Less than three percent of the books published in the United States, Great Britain, and Australia are translations, while in parts of Europe and Latin America the numbers hover between 25% and 40%. In 2008, the permanent secretary of the Swedish Academy declared, "The U.S. is too isolated, too insular. They don't translate enough and don't participate in the big dialogue of literature."

Who does participate in the big dialogue? In January, 2012, I arrived in Cuenca, Ecuador, for a four-month stay. During my first week, I watched a young girl in a café, her ebony hair falling over a book. I remembered myself at sixteen and pondered the worlds she might inhabit through translation. In this small country, with an estimated literacy rate of 84 percent (vs. 99 percent in the U.S.) and a per capita income of \$4,501, who reads? Which books are translated, and from which languages? I begin visiting *papelerías*—small shops that sell notebooks, wrapping paper and miscellaneous paper goods but also books. In one store, *Sexercise* sat next to a translation of Hegel from German to Spanish, next to the translation of Italian Umberto Eco's *El Nombre de La Rosa* (*The Name of the Rose*), alongside Portuguese writer Jose Saramago's *Ensayo Sobre la Ceguera* (*Blindness*). I asked the proprietor, a handsome woman in a red shawl, how she decided which books to order. She replied, "I buy whatever people ask for." "Do many people make requests?" I asked. "Por supuesto"—"Of course." Books are expensive here; I couldn't yet gauge who read this wild variety of translated authors. But linguistic choices seemed vast for those who could afford them.

A few days later, escaping an afternoon deluge, I dipped into Sodilibro Cía, a bookstore on Calle Benigno Malo. Books wrapped in plastic filled the huge front windows. Simone Weil's *A La Espera de Dios* (*Waiting for God*) rested alongside Christopher Hitchens's *Dios No Es Bueno* (*God Is Not Great*). How delighted the recently-deceased Hitchens would be to know that the hand of a translator brought his "case against religion" to this Catholic country. I wandered the store, dizzy at the unfamiliar and translated titles. I almost cried out when I found Irish writer John McGahern's *Entre*

Mujeres (*Amongst Women*). I was riveted back to Northern Ireland during the rainy summer of 1995, where I worked with Catholic and Protestant women in the final days of The Troubles. Through the six weeks that I waited for my husband Bob to arrive, McGahern's dark story captivated and held me. Finding the novel in Spanish felt like running into an old friend thousands of miles from home with that startled, "What are you doing here?"

In Libri Mundi, the largest bookstore in Cuenca, I scanned volume after volume of intriguing titles by Latin American writers I'd not heard of because they'd never been translated into English. I felt my nose pressed against the glass of another culture, cut off from the interior lives experienced through literature here. On adjacent shelves sat titles by English-speaking writers from Ken Follett to Paul Auster to Ernest Hemingway. Among the English titles, I suddenly found a copy of Ecuadorian writer Alicia Yáñez Cossío's stories of the Galapagos, *Beyond the Islands*, translated by Oregonian Amalia Gladhart. "See?" I wanted to shout, "We're not all insular." But when, I wondered, would we in the U.S. seek greater balance in translation, truly participating in the big dialogue?

A slim volume in English finally stopped my internal rant. On a central table sat Robert Hass's translation from Swedish to English of Tomas Tranströmer's poetry. Earlier, I'd seen a flyer taped to the window in Sodilibro Cía announcing Tranströmer's 2011 Nobel Prize for literature. "He is to Sweden what Robert Frost was to America," wrote John Freeman, the editor of the literary magazine *Granta*. Something quickened in me. A sensation returned, the one I've had in the presence of books and languages for my entire life—the thrill of finishing *Anna Karenina*, the memory of sitting in church, transported, as "eléison" bent toward "mercy," the wonder of words and those who labor to carry their meanings across borders. Here was the taut pull of connective tissue that defies insularity. All of us depend on this life-changing work, the carrying over, the transformation of words into parallel versions so that we might know, if only in part, the darkness of a Swedish winter, the profound differences and the shared human struggles that are Tranströmer's subject.

In *Why Translation Matters*, Grossman quotes the first translators of the King James Bible in 1611:

Translation it is that openeth the window, to let in the light; that breaketh the shell that we may eat the kernel; that putteth aside the curtain, that we may look into the most holy place; that removeth the cover of the well, that we might come by the water. (50)

Translation feels akin to something holy. How close, I think, are *liturgy* and *literature*: liturgy from the Greek *leitourgos*, “one who performs a public ceremony or service,” literature from the Latin “lit(t)era “letter.”

“All great texts,” writes Walter Benjamin, “contain their potential translation between the lines; this is true to the highest degree of sacred writings.” Perhaps all literature is sacred in this way, revealing something ineffable in the crossing to another language, yielding to the grace and labor of a human hand.

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Walking the Borders

William Stafford

Sometimes in the evenings a translator walks out and listens by streams that wander back and forth across borders. The translator holds a mint on the tongue, turns it over to try a new side, then tastes a wild new flavor, a flavor that enlivens those fading languages of cursing and calling each other those names



that destroyed millions by swinging a cross like an ax, or a crescent curved like a knife, or a star so red it burned its way over the ground.

The wild new flavor fades away too, but lingers awhile along borders for a translator to savor secretly, borrowing from both sides, holding for a moment the smooth round world in that cool instant of evening before the sun goes down.

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William Stafford traveled as a representative for poetry and peace to Egypt, Iran, Pakistan, India, Nepal, Poland, and other lands, and translated poetry from Spanish and Urdu into English. “Walking the Borders” is from The Way It Is (Graywolf Press, 1998) and is reprinted by permission of Kim Stafford at the Estate of William Stafford.

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