Felix qui potuit rerum cognoscere causas

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"There is nothing more erudite than a human language; sentences are as flexible as they are abundant; the world of words is one without limits, on the juourney there as well as on the journey back" said Ulysses, "and on my return to Ithaca I placed a motto on the door of my house: translation is a way back".

With memory being like a customised cape, the memory of my childhood would not fit neatly over the childhood shoulders of many readers, but I have rummaged through my mind and I would like to answer one question: when was it that I first became aware that I was reading a translation?

Ordinary readers from a culture with a highly developed language and a great tradition do not notice when they are dealing with an original text and when they are dealing with a translation. If they took a closer look at both texts, they might venture a guess at which one is which whereas they would not be able to tell them apart that much nor would they be able to say what was in the original version that was not in the translation. At most, they would stick to the line — an over-used line? — that the original gives more enjoyment since it does not sound like a translation. That sums up, in short, the vitality of the most informed reader.

Koldo Mitxelena left us with something in writing about this which was, as usual, rather majestic.

> "Hence, I do not know whether we have not overestimated their value [Mitxelena is referring to translations]. In developed languages, translations abound, but the translations do not determine status for a language. This is done, instead, by original works. In times when a literature is flourishing, translations come naturally just like the tail comes after the body. There is nothing beyond that tail: something no more than a long or short appendage poses little harm to the body. Foreigners would be more amazed at us if we could have them translate a work of ours into their foreign languages than by translating ten works from their language into ours".

Note: This article was published in *Senez, 14* (EIZIE, 1999) and also in the book *Mentura dugun artean* by the same author (Alberdania, 2001).

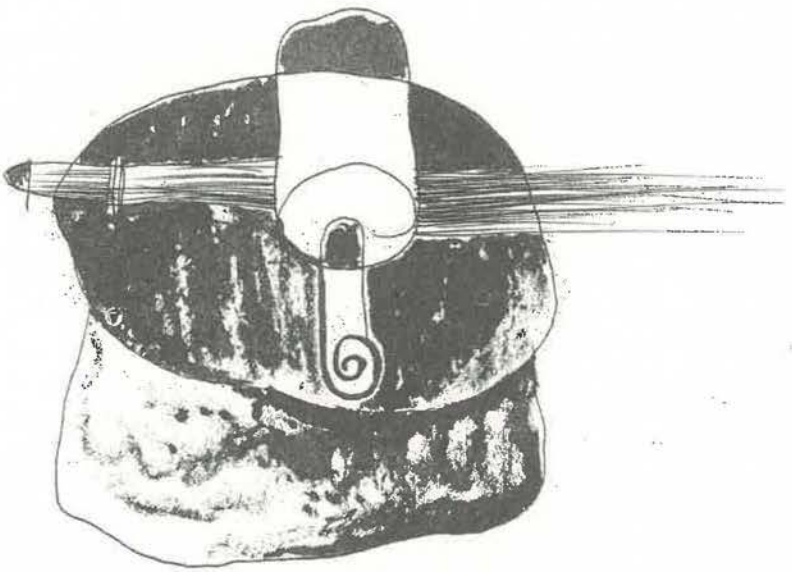
Mitxelena's long quote about the comparison between the body and the tail is the one that is most open to debate: our civilization, to a certain extent, is based on translation. Milan Kundera said that translators are more important than all of the European Parliamentarians put together while, as far as the situation of Basque is concerned, it is my opinion that translation is more than just "an appendage that could be cut off without causing grievous harm to the body", and not only on account of the choices that it offers knowledge-wise. I enjoy many of the very latest translations more than some of the very latest material written in Basque: "translation has to be so skilful", said Feijóo, "that I would say that it is easier to find good writers in the original language than good translators". Translations play an important role in the most interesting period of our literature: we have forgotten about the Basque translators from the Second Republic — Orixe, Otxolua, Markiegi, Arregi, etc. — but we would understand the activities of Orixe, Lizardi and Lauaxeta better if we took into account what lay behind the style of writing in the works that they translated.

However, let me go back to the fortuitous view that holds that translations are difficult, frayed, and tedious.

In our experience, to be sure, the idea that translations in our language do not have the same fluidity as the original has made the rounds. What, then, is this "natural fluidity"? There is a much greater difference between the natural fluidity present in most of the books in the Auspoa collection and Axular's and Mirande's works than in whatever flows in books ranging from a translation in Universal Literature to Ramon Saizarbitoria's or Itxaro Borda's novels.

The axis of the argument, in my opinion, is off-centred. Pedagogical and didactic criteria — which run more of a risk of forgetting about the overall communicative capacity of the language instead of guaranteeing the social development thereof — shape literary activity to the point of pushing literature itself aside. Such an attitude, besides leaving the translation lacking and open to scorn, only serves in practice to glorify *some* original language works: namely, those with simple, limited and plain language which have always had the same kind of fluidity and knowledge. At the other extreme, there is the utopian view that by translating everything — paradoxically, by translating everything that is not literature —, all would be resolved. Mitxelena also launched a broadside at that: "a country where everyone becomes a translator runs quite an obvious risk. It is not in charge of its own language but is, instead, subject to the language of others".

The point of the matter is, as always, moderation. If, in our country, the number of translations is high — I am not sure whether that is the case —, we would have to decide on which cultural fields are indispensable to translate and which are not. That, however, forces us to come to an agreement on a translation strategy. Translation work that has been agreed upon in the areas of criteria and direction — in several countries where their language situation is more settled than ours — shows us that it is more effective to translate the best manuals on various aspects of chemistry than translating the latest innovations in polymers. That is even clearer in literature: we need Shake-



speare himself in Basque before we can delve into analyses of Shakespeare. In order to read untranslated works, we have several *lingua francas* at our disposal, whichever they may be — Spanish, French, English, etc. — ones that each translator can use as a bridge language.

Let me look back, nevertheless, to my childhood in reference to my opening words. I remember quite vividly that child who only knew Basque. I also remember quite vividly the image of that child that had just learnt Spanish. That child had two places in his activities, which were marked out according to the language: one was an everyday world devoid of the glittering of letters — home, friends, my hometown — while the other one was an attractive and exotic world that came to the fore through letters — school, books, football cards, cinema —. First there is one place and then there are two, I am not conscious of when and how I started to feel bilingual, but I am unaware of how the change came about and how long that change took. My teacher Don Antonio and nature distinguished between río (river) and ría (estuary) where up to then I had only seen *erriyua* (Basquized form of rio). A child's *erriyua* had no place on the blackboard. I also had problems with register in Basque: as I came from a non-nationalist family, and because everyone around me in my youth was named Joxe Mari, Joxe Antonio, or Joxe Miel, when my Basque ear first heard the name Joseba Andoni, I did not know whether I was supposed to understand it as Joxe Bandoni or Joxepa Antoni.

Little by little, as I forged ahead with my studies, I began to move away from the Basque world and from the symbolic and affective world inherent to Basque: *Querida madre* appears at the top of the first letter I ever wrote home: I was far from home and where I was, all the new friends I made spoke Spanish. From time to time, often unexpectedly, I was to begin to discover who could speak Basque and who could not.

What fluidity was there in the sentiments present in my letter where I begin with *Querida Madre*? Was I translating the things from the affective world of Basque so that my mother would later translate it all back into Basque, or had it also been the case that Spanish had, by that time, taken over the sentimental part of me? I cannot say, I do not remember. The little that I do know is that I first become aware of the existence of translation by translating Latin. As I was translating the Wars in Gaul from Latin into Spanish, I clearly recall the going back and forth, relationships, curves, cliffs, common places, and distances between the two different structures. Taking Spanish as the starting as well as the finishing point, the linguistic Rubicon between Latin and Spanish was a syntactical ordering, bowing to the rules of Spanish. I had to first bend Virgil's sentence *felix qui potuit cognoscere causas rerum* into Spanish syntax and then order *felix qui potuit rerum cognoscere* accordingly in order to tackle the translation. That is how I developed the method which was becoming more and more second nature to me until I had completely assimilated Spanish structure. Some day I will have to tell about how that ordering affected me nearly forty years later when I was translating Apuleius' *Golden Ass*. I was mentally ordering the sentences according to Spanish syntactical rules; it was only after this that I started the Basque translation. It is an experience that can be told step by step: it lends itself to writing an apocryphal diary about them.

Nevertheless, I did not go to the same trouble with liturgical Latin that I did with Virgil. Virgil's Latin was all twisted while liturgical Latin was correct, appropriate, enjoyable, and smooth. There is no great mystery about it: Spanish was the iridescent platinum of syntactical ordering, the Spanish schemata of things made the liturgical one easy to go through while Virgil contorted it. God apparently also knew about Latin with the Spanish schemata, and we translated the authors (Julius Caesar, Suetonius, Cicero, Virgil, etc., as well as all of the secular authors). They were mere training for us so that later on we could be skilful users of Biblical and liturgical texts that we would have to read, hear, and repeat. Nevertheless, and whatever the case might have been, the world of letters — the whys and wherefores of it — were in the possession of Latin and Spanish.

In the broad area of culture that we called Humanities, we worked, albeit practically in an anecdotal way, on Greek, which was much further removed from what we had been hearing. Later on I started with French, but I did not make much headway in it on account of my tin ear for learning languages and because of the poor teaching methods used (some day someone will have to study how the Spanish education system always manages to fail to teach foreign languages). In the meantime, Basque began to take its place in a difficult and nearly clandestine

manner — at first its presence was merely a token one — in the Humanities programme.

With said goals in mind, we read and worked through classical authors and liturgical texts. There were, however, two kinds of literature that I read in Spanish: the ones that they told us were fine and exemplary — writers such as Bécquer, Pereda, Coloma, and Azorín, even Pemán, who were worthy of being included in Martín de Riquer's anthology. But none of these held a flame, in charm or fluidity, to the ones that I had picked out — of course, I am talking about the ones that did not make it into any anthology such as Salgari, Graham Greene, Richard Crompton, and Jules Verne. Some were readings that were compulsory: academic, which I was to follow as writing model while the others were for leisure: those that were free-spirited and that caught my imagination.

The boundary between different kinds of literature had nothing to do with the original language and everything to do with sifting through them with my Spanish reading programme: on one hand, there were compulsory readings while, on the other, there were some that owed something to their freedom of action. Compulsory academic readings were chosen haphazardly; they were present in anthologies; they were designed to carry through an agenda: they were made to be accompanied by pencil in hand and they obliged one to have a dictionary at hand at all times. They were totally boring, at least for someone who had no pedantic inclination towards languages. Leisure reading, on the other hand, gave us the chance to put aside a book that we did not care for and to take up a new one. Somehow, I owed the particular pleasure I felt inside while reading both original works and translations to the very enjoyment of reading, itself. During that time, I came to realize that all reading — the same thing went for the texts in my own language — was a work of translation. During that time, I likewise learnt that reading and learning were like love: the more of yourself you put in, the more you will benefit from others — from students, studies, readings.

However, the question is that we were reading academic as well as entertaining literature in Spanish. What was Spanish and what was translated? I made comparisons; I remember that I found Garcilaso more similar to Azorín than to Somerset Maugham even though Azorín and Maugham were contemporaries. On the contrary, when I tackled Carmen Laforet's successful *Nada*, even while doing it under the cover of bedsheets, I found it to be closer to Bernanos than anything by a Spanish writer. Even by intuition, I had begun to figure out what the tradition of a language was and what was literary ideology: even if it is made up of literature in which the tradition of language is developed, literary ideology spans the greatest boundary between languages. The language lends a literature its nationality, not aesthetics.

I will not say that I had a clear perception of all that then, but, nevertheless, there it is: I first read the complete works of Shakespeare and Molière, more than the works by Lope de Vega and Calderón; there is also the fact that I read Stendahl's *Le Rouge et le Noir* before I did Pérez Galdós' *Nazarín*. To be sure, in addition to an attitude contrary to the academic rules that had been presented to me as exemplary, there is something else

to the story. Through an adaptation, and therefore superficially, I drew closer to Shakespeare for the first time. I was twelve and thanks to Charles Lamb's commendable book, *Tales from Shakespeare*, I became familiar with the anecdotal journey of the tragedy *Hamlet*. Since then, I have been able to become familiar with two Spanish versions of *Hamlet*: the former, translated by Moratín, when I was a student and the latter, translated by José María Valverde, much later in my life.

It is enough to take a quick glance at both translations to become aware of the problem that translation of poetry exacerbates: Moratín, unlike Valverde, also adapted the original verse form into Spanish. Valverde justified not translating it into verse by mentioning the loss in translation: "The loss in translation is effective, given that one of the principal values of Elizabethan theatre is its formal elasticity".

When Juan Garzia translated Shakespeare's sonnets, he took the text and form into account: English sonnets are sonnets in Basque as well. "Is it not better to do without the rhyme?", Juan Garzia asks in the preface, "and if so, why respect the meter? Why not render it in prose? Although all ways are valid (look at translations in other languages), my answer is inevitably simple: a sonnet is a sonnet."

The translation of a tragedy into poetry or verse is not letting the world know what they say, it is not, like squeezing juice from an orange, squeezing the gist of the original in an anecdotal way. In the translation, the reader would have to be familiar with the most complete and analogous elements inherent to the aesthetic enjoyment of the original. However, it is hard to translate into any foreign language this passage of Koldo Izagirre's, which rails against dependency on foreign tongues without resorting to footnotes and to the detriment of immediate enjoyment.

> Eta ez du deus aurkitzen ez pilotuaren malurarik
> Ez maisuaren ikararik ez Martin d'Oyarçabalen
> [mentura goserik
> Ternura! Esaten zuenean branka hartuz lur berri
> [bati.

> And he finds nothing, neither the pilot's woe
> Nor the boatswain's dread nor Martin
> [d'Oyarçabal's hunger for luck
> When he said, "Ternura!, steering the bow
> [towards a new land.

The double-entendre of "Ternura!" (to Newfoundland / tenderness! (Span.)) is impossible to translate and so information has to be given. Poetry is untranslatable in the same way that music is, as Voltaire said. Music is, at most, an echo, says George Borrow. There is no need, however, to go to the other extreme of such a pessimistic view held about the impossibility of translation, accepting the fact that not every echo of the original can be picked up in translation. Nevertheless, as Juan Garzia says, "without that arrogance, no one would ever translate literature".

Yet, we should also bear another problem in mind: Shakespeare's language is set in a certain period and an Englishman of today refers back to the sonnets or the tragedy *Hamlet* with his current English. Nevertheless, a translator does not pick up that difference between modern language and the language from that period. Although Garzia does try to bring it closer to 17th century

Basque, he cannot avoid translating it from the vantage point of today and so the Basque in the sonnets is modern Basque, not 17th century Basque. A modern-day Spanish-speaker would have more trouble reading Moratín's version of Hamlet than Valverde's. The latter is contemporary to the reader. However, the reader of Valverde's version would have an easier time reading Shakespeare than the average English-speaker reading the original. In the original, the language is always from "back then"; in translation, "back then" language turns into "today's".

The consequences arising from this are clear to see. Let us suppose a Spanish translator who believes that Valverde's version is unsuitable, starts translating *Hamlet* over again. Let us suppose a Basque writer, believing that Garzia's work is unsuitable, embarks on re-translating the sonnets. What could be enriching for a language that is fully standardized (such as Spanish) would be detrimental to our language on account of reasons such as effectiveness and a dearth of resources. Unlike Spanish-speakers, we Basque-speakers need translations to be done as clearly as possible so that they can last as long as possible. We Basques must bear very much in mind that, unlike in the neighbouring languages, time burns everything up, just like paper which, left in the sun, turns yellow, develops cracks, and in the end burns up.

We are in dire need of a translation policy, especially in three areas. Firstly, regarding what is to be translated: translations selected by a clearly thought-out policy should be at the top of the list of translation priorities when the government administration gives out grants. Secondly, there is the problem of the quality of translation, and perhaps it is this second point where we have had the longest and hardest thinking. Thirdly, there is need for a policy that will promote the reading of translations: why try and translate something if later the reader rejects reading that translation?

A translation transports the text to the reader's time. A work of translation does something akin to translating Axular's *Gero* into modern Unified Basque. However, the translation, unlike a modernization of *Gero*, inevitably transports the text to its time. Even if a translation brings the original, fixed language up to date, as the years go by, even the best of translations begin to collect dust which forces us to renew a translation (if translation itself is not to evolve into a literary model beyond a mere translation). I have Orixe's *Aitorkizunak* in mind: it may not be, as far as staying close to the original text is concerned, a model of translation — I am not in a position to judge —, but we all will also find in those pages an excellent example of fluid prose which brings to mind what a British humorist said when he compared translations and women with male chauvinist imagery: if they are faithful, they are not pretty, and if they are not pretty, they are not faithful. If someone came to the Basque stage of letters with another more detailed translation of St. Augustine's work, he might further knowledge about St. Augustine but he would not eclipse the great merits of Orixe's achievement.

Once I heard on a panel discussion a technocrat of the language who disparaged literary translations but who was challenged on doing technical and bureaucratic Basque translation: Which version of *Don Quixote*

would someone from Salamanca, who knew French very well, have an easier time reading, a modern French translation or the Spanish original? And he was as pleased as Punch with his seemingly sharp question. Someone without the slightest bit of knowledge of literature can mix up mechanical reading with literary enjoyment in which we have knowledge of the language on one hand and the necessary literary style on the other. I would venture to say that it was "too bad for him" if that clumsy and arrogant point of view of literature were not also detrimental to Basque as well.

Indeed, that is another one of our problems: our children have a very hard time growing fond of Basque by mere exposure to it when we take into account the lamentable level of the average textbook translation that they have to put up with throughout their academic years. It is hardly surprising that my generation has an easier time reading James Joyce's *The Dubliners* in Spanish and French — and I have taken a translation that I think highly of and regard as exemplary — than in Basque, and I shall not go into the reasons that we already know so well. What *is* surprising — and someone should be called to answer for this — is that the same thing goes for our children even after having studied everything in Basque at school.

The point is — a sad point indeed — that both our generation and our descendents have an easier time reading all the Spanish translations than the Basque version of the very same thing. It is as if we were reading in a foreign language that was impossible to master, and we are fooling ourselves by saying that Joyce or Hamsun or Cocteau are difficult when they are smooth reads: many Basques have the same trouble reading Saizarbitoria and Sagastizabal; namely, the same trouble that would not lighten the burden of translating Stephen King or Corín Tellado. The translation vs. original contest is, somehow or the other, nothing more than a cover-up of the real problem: the weakness that we readers labour under due to the influence of the neighbouring languages.

Let us compare, and I say this with pride, the Spanish and Basque versions of Joyce's *The Dubliners*. The Spanish translator had tradition on his side, the normalization of his language and all, while Irene Aldasoro, like many Basque translators, broke the logical mould that the Basque version had to come a poor second. There is truth in art and, like anywhere else, necessity quickens the imagination.

Yet, there is something else: the creative work of translators is being forgotten as we discuss translation. Neither Basque nor even the most powerful of languages can, through translation, take in so many voices, thoughts, atmospheres, and cultural points of view. The world has a lot of sounds and translation is one way to hear those sounds in my language. There are still a lot of feelings, emotions, ways of seeing things, twists, and heart-felt situations out there in the corners of the world and in literature that Basque has yet to name. That is why it is of the utmost importance that the most resonant voices — those echoes that boom above all others — are translated into Basque.

Faced with all that, problems of identification between many Basque readers and texts have been mentioned, a deficit that the

community of speakers throws back at translations and translators: the average person among us who reads is not in favour of Basque but for Spanish or French instead.

Ulysses was afraid of forgetting his way back. As he walked and rowed his way home, he had to create ways of remembering things. It is an indispensable way to fix experience. Translation is also a means of reading the route; a weapon against oblivion; a way of securing in our own language the experience of travels that men and woman have embarked upon through different tongues. Translation does not look back, it is more a creative work than a reconstruction. We readers, when we do not know the original language, accept the translator's mental sieve; we accept that the reading rendered by the translator is much more profound and stately than our own; we are in the hands of the translator so that he or she will guide us along the path that we could otherwise not travel on our own.

Translation is a watchtower. What is seen from there is not as concrete and exact as the landscape we can see rolling across the horizon. If a certain work from the past is distant from us through time and space, translators will have to pay special attention so as to get acquainted with the alien voices of the times and places, to try and pick up even the most imperceptible echoes. If the watchtower of translation proves to be blurry for us, it is because the eyes of the translator were also blurry. The routine watchtower, however, will punish us with bittersweet results. The translator's overenthusiastic love for his or her translation material may cause some haze and mist emanating from a warmth that can blind the translation ...

Obstacles, nonetheless, cannot cause us to deviate. Translation is the only way we have to make a bridge: between other languages and our own; between the past and the future; between universal culture and that of each Basque individual. Translation is something with which we are able to see characters and landscapes with our very own eyes, a rich and indispensable way to join our own voice with a common one.

On my way back from Ithaca, I put a motto on the door to my house: translation is a way back.

SYNTHÈSE

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Anjel Lertxundi, auteur connu et reconnu des lettres basques, nous propose dans cet article quelques réflexions très suggestives, spécialement adressées aux écrivains, aux traducteurs et aux simples lecteurs.

Après une description de la traduction en général, il passe très vite à retracer son expérience et sa relation personnelles avec la littérature et la traduction, se situant au sein d'une génération et d'une communauté linguistique spécifiques : bascophone de naissance, il vit dans une communauté bilingue, basque-espagnol, la première langue étant en situation de diglossie, et il appartient à une génération dont la langue de formation scolaire et universitaire est l'espagnol. Il a donc eu connaissance de la littérature universelle grâce aux traductions faites en cette langue.

Au fil de son exposé, il énumère les caractéristiques et les fonctions de toute bonne traduction dont la principale est de rendre le texte original compréhensible au lecteur actuel, le texte traduit étant parfois plus accessible à ce dernier que la version originale. Le traducteur est pour lui à la fois un guide dans le temps et dans l'espace, il fait œuvre de restaurateur, il est aussi le beffroi qui nous permet de regarder et d'apprécier la littérature universelle, et enfin, le pont entre notre langue et les autres, le passé et le futur, chacun de nous et la culture.

Se penchant sur l'euskara (langue basque) en particulier, il est forcé de constater les déficiences qui découlent de la situation de précarité dans laquelle elle a été maintenue jusqu'à récemment. Contrairement aux langues voisines, elle manque d'une tradition littéraire solide.

De ce fait, la traduction étant un instrument à la fois nécessaire et efficace pour aider la langue à sortir de cette situation de précarité, une politique de la traduction s'avère indispensable, politique qui, selon l'auteur, se résume en trois points:

- Donner la priorité à la traduction de certains travaux par rapport à d'autres, faute de moyens et de temps pour tout traduire ou pour faire plusieurs versions des mêmes textes.
- Soigner la qualité de la traduction : l'auteur pense que c'est dans ce domaine que l'on a fait le plus d'efforts.
- Encourager la lecture des œuvres traduites en les rendant attrayantes.

Il faut donc non seulement se pencher sur la traduction elle-même, le choix des textes et la qualité, mais aussi essayer d'inciter le plus grand nombre de gens à la lecture de ces traductions.

Pour Lertxundi la traduction est un moyen très propice, d'une part pour mettre à notre portée la littérature d'ailleurs, nous offrant un choix de lecture beaucoup plus ample et nous faisant découvrir d'autres cultures et civilisations ; et d'autre part, pour enrichir et consolider notre propre littérature et la langue elle-même.