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On Translation

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*O Tosco che per la città del foco
vivo ten vai così parlando onesto
piaciati di restare in questo loco.
La tua loquela ti fa manifesto
di quella nobil patria natio
alla qual forse fui troppo molesto.*

—*Divina Commedia Inferno, Canto X, 22–28*

"O Tuscan, who through the City of Fire, *alive*, goes speaking so modestly, may it please you to stop in this place. Your speech reveals you as from that noble fatherland-nation [Florence] to which I was, perhaps, too much of a bother."

Thus speaks Farinata, still perhaps a bit defensive even in hell, to Dante: he is speaking of the death and destruction he caused from the faction opposite Dante's. But imagine for a moment the faint glimmer of hope of one so isolated and tormented in the fires of the City of Dis, who yet hears the precise melody of his native dialect coming from someone passing through while still *alive, in the flesh*. "O Tosco!" is used only twice in the *Commedia* and reminds us of the Gospel, when Peter is identified by his Galilean accent as, literally, one "who *must* be one of Jesus' followers."

The scene is poignant because it prompts us all to remember the most tender tones of the language, the accent, we first heard on our mother's knee before we could even respond. We know scientifically that, for a long time, babies, rather like foreigners, can understand a lot more passively than they can express actively. That language is so very close to us; it seems to project who we are and how we are in the world. Translating texts into a new language is a daunting enterprise, if for no other reason than the impossible task of approaching that homespun linguistic space; and then having to face the painful truth that our efforts will inevitably result in an approximation.

But still, we can help each other. Rather than a full blown theory of translation, let me present a couple of pointers. There are principles that can help keep us on guard when we are reading a translation.

My first example comes from the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola. Since it was written in the sixteenth century it presents a few challenges, as does any other text of ages past. Two important points relate to, first, the *goal* of the Exercises; and second, the role and nature of creation as we find ourselves in it.

In Loyola's Autograph, the heading, which defines the role of the Exercises, actually looks like *this*:

[21] EJERCICIOS ESPIRITUALES PARA VENCER A

SI MISMO Y ORDENAR SU VIDA

SIN DETERMINARSE POR AFECCION

ALGUNA QUE DESORDENADA SEA

[Upper Case, bold added by St. Ignatius]

This could be translated thus:

Spiritual Exercises for conquering

Yourself and ordering your life

Without being determined by any affection/affect characterized by passionate attachment

Which might be disordered.

Rhetorically, it is a strophe with the choice of conquering the self and ordering life versus being conquered by disordered affections. Our modern problem is the tendency to think of affection as a passing fancy, somewhat attenuated. However, in Spanish the word is a doublet with the same Latin root as *afición*. In Spain, an *aficionado* is a fan, such as a sports fan. In order to understand the intensity of an *aficionado*, think of the violence displayed at some soccer matches! This structure represents the simplicity of the Exercises of Ignatius: the simple choice for or against Christ. The Exercises are about that choice.

On the other hand, the Louis Puhl S.J. translation commonly used in the U.S. renders the heading thus:

SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

Which have as their purpose the conquest of self

And the regulation of one's life in such a way that

No decision is made under the influence of any

Inordinate attachment. [emphasis mine]

Every journey of a thousand miles begins with that first step. So too a journey to conversion. The difficulty with the Puhl translation is that it introduces a metaphor that is not extant in the original, that is, of *regulating* something. Paul Ricoeur, in *The Rule of Metaphor*, recovers the importance of metaphor as a vehicle of truth and knowledge, not just a minor literary trope, as in modern usage. Aristotle understood in his *Rhetoric* that a metaphor could be used also to lie, exaggerate or propagandize. But metaphors are powerful, formative, and we do not have ultimate power over the language we inherit. Most metaphors come from some semantic field. Ironically, the term semantic field is itself a metaphor, being agricultural. Metaphors are multivalent, giving literature its evocative power for this very reason. I like to teach at a table with students, rather than have them sit in child-sized chairs in a classroom. But if that table is a metaphor for the classroom, then there are many

different kinds of “table”: kitchen for casual, frank discussion, formal dining for presentations, or operating tables for textual surgery, analysis and synthesis. Each metaphor comes with a different feel and flexibility.

Regulating something suggests setting parameters for it, accepting and modifying it on the basis of “more or less,” a lot like temperature. This is coupled with the unfortunate phrase, “inordinate attachment.” Most will immediately recognize “inordinate” as “excessive.” Even Wiktionary defines inordinate as, “excessive, unreasonable or inappropriate in magnitude, extreme.”

However, this is not what Ignatius is doing at all. If we respect the rhetorical construction, then we can see a contrast between an ordered life, ordered according to God’s plan for us, and disordered affections, which are all too familiar. Ignatius is concerned about the ability of a possible exercitant to *choose*, otherwise he is not apt for the Exercises *at this time* (cf. Deuteronomy 30:15-20, or Psalm 1). There is no “third way” in the Exercises, where one fails to be presented throughout with the choice to “choose *life* in Christ. To simply coast comfortably with my vices, as long as they are not *too* excessive, is not a choice here. Happily, the recent *Ratio Fundamentalis* or fundamental rationale for the formation of priests by the Roman Catholic Church appropriately paraphrases this section saying: “In this ongoing path of discernment, the priest will... “free himself from all disordered affects and, having removed them, to seek out and find the will of God in the ordering of his life with a view to the salvation of the soul” (ch. 3, no. 43, emphasis mine). We can readily see the difference as applicable to any Christian!

A second critical issue for the Exercises arises in the so-called “first principle and foundation,” as follows:

[23] PRINCIPIO Y FUNDAMENTO.

El hombre es criado para alabar, hacer reverencia y servir a Dios nuestro Señor y, mediante esto, salvar su ánima; y las otras cosas sobre la haz de la tierra son criadas para el hombre, y para que le ayuden en la prosecución del fin para que es criado...

Structurally, this is a virtual *inclusio*, beginning with humans as created, and finishing with the end for which we are created.

The first important point is the translation of the title itself. In this instance, *Principio* in Spanish evokes more profoundly the biblical phrase “in the beginning.” It has much more to do with starting from the beginning, the origin of things, than an intellectual “principle” *a priori*. It may be translated thus: “Man is created (*criado*) to praise, reverence and serve God our Lord and, by means of this, to save his soul; and the other things upon the face of the earth are created (*criadas*) for man, and so that they might help him in following through on the end for which he is created (*criado*).”

Ignatius used the vocabulary available to express this concept. In his day the verb create (*crear*) existed in very limited form, as in the Pope “creating” Cardinals. This expression is actually still used in English today. Instead, Spanish used *Criar* in a much more biblical and Catholic sense, viz., that God nurtures and *orders* the world, creating it over time, caring for it, bringing it to fruition: ultimately coming back to him WHO is our *fin*, our end. In Spanish, a *criada* is a maid, someone who comes in and cleans, puts everything back in order. Still today, a baby is a *criatura*, one who is to be nurtured and fed, loved and cared for over time. Consequently, Creation is *Criada*, nurtured by a provident God for our salvation. The almost universal, even unavoidable, English translation as “Creation” or “Created” certainly runs the risk of buying into the scientific mentality of the “Big Bang” or creation *ex nihilo*, which is simply

not what is at stake in this text.

Too many people in the West, following Bacon, seem to feel the need to constrain nature, squeeze its secrets out, conquer it, bend it to our will, instead of conquering ourselves! Perhaps these essentially spiritual misconceptions are at the root of militant or extreme environmentalism. It is as if beauty itself, the human and the rest, is misunderstood or threatening to spirituality, virtue or chastity. If the foundational ideas of the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius are mistranslated then an unfortunate spin is inherited by those seeking to profit from them spiritually. That would be quite a few people. Spiritual texts may seem inspired, but it is up to us who inherit them to use them wisely whilst paying it forward.

A good wordsmith chooses words carefully. Our first principle of translation then has to be that of respecting an author's choices by respecting the semantic field and history of the author's chosen words. However, it is important to avoid interjecting a metaphor where none exists, or removing one that does exist; all of which may drive a reader down a rabbit hole of unrecognized assumptions from which no escape is possible, precisely because the reader does not know he or she needs to escape!

So much for what not to do. What should we, as translators, *actually do*?

Extrapolating from our first principle, it is important to note a controversy at war for a century after Saussure wrote his *Cours de linguistique générale*, wherein he created an opposition between the change of meaning in a word's history, which is diachronic; versus the meaning it has contemporaneously, right now, in all of its possible current meanings, which is synchronic. We all know words change their meanings over time. But we have to avoid the genetic or etymological fallacy of assuming that words can *only* have their meaning from history, based on their root. On the other hand, if we assume that words *only* have their contemporary meaning, we risk jettisoning art itself. An artist knows words have extensive history and baggage. That is what provides depth, shade, pointed ambiguity, even humor and plays on words, pace Joyce or Eliot.

Let us look at a positive example: an authentic and authoritative text from the Roman Catholic Mass, which showcases how word choice matters. The exact way in which the original Greek liturgy used in the West gently flowed into a Latin translation is difficult to pinpoint. However, after the Offertory, the priest says:

Oráte, fratres, ut meum ac vestrum sacrificium acceptábile fiat apud Deum Patrem omnipoténtem.

Pray, brethren, that my and your sacrifice might become acceptable to God the almighty Father.

The people respond:

Suscípiat Dóminus sacrificium de mánibus tuis ad laudem et glóriam nóminis sui, ad utilitátem quoque nostram totiúsque Ecclesiæ suæ sanctæ.

As commonly translated: "May the Lord accept the sacrifice at your hands for the praise and glory of his name, for our good and the good of all his holy Church."

The point of concern here is the verb *suscipio* in Latin. The verb form in the Liturgy is a present subjunctive, i.e., *may* the Lord accept etc. Of course, the real question is what the verb signifies. Suddenly, it makes sense to look at not only what the verb meant at the time of the drafting of the text, but what it means historically and holistically. Here, Ricoeur is helpful because he argues for what may be called panchronicity, to resolve the issues between the warriors of *syn-* and *diachronicity*. To understand the full meaning of this chosen word, and not another word, one takes into account not

only the contemporary meaning, but its historical meaning as well. And here the depth of meaning bequeathed to us becomes apparent. As it stands at the heart of our Liturgy, it is important.

Certainly, the root and etymological meaning of *suscipere* is to grasp, to catch something from underneath it and bear it up. Of course, this something could be some kind of a *munus*, a duty, or an office, a burden of some kind, honorific or otherwise. Thus, it means to pick something up and support it, put it on your shoulders and carry it, if you will. To “undertake” may be a perfect literal translation, but something of a distraction in our modern period!

The word *suscipere* is the perfect translation for the action in the Mass at precisely the correct moment. Pure genius, because it carries with it not only the rather bland meaning of “accept” or “receive” but rather the cultural meaning of a primary experience in Roman culture. The very founding of the Roman world relies on the myth of Romulus and Remus who were, notably, *exposed*, not killed. That is to say, they were left to the greater powers of Fate and Fortune; but not actively *aborted*. In the Roman world the Domina, or mistress of the household, having given birth, would beg the father of the child, the Paterfamilias, to “accept” the child, boy or girl. During the Republic, he had the right to reject the child for any reason, i.e., due to deformity, gender, or suspicion that adultery had taken place. Needless to say, the moment in which a swaddled child was presented to the Paterfamilias, depending on the family dynamics, could have been quite harrowing. The Domina of the house would petition the Paterfamilias: *Suscipe Domine!* Take up, Lord, this child and make it your own. If he did so, it would be legally his, recognized fully as his child.

If we return to the *Suscipiat Dominus* with a new set of eyes, we see something truly profound: because the people come with bread and wine, gifts that are to become the body and blood of their anointed one, the Christ, the Son. But he is fully and truly one of us. He is flesh of our flesh and bone of our bone. He is the Incarnation which makes him truly *ours*. He is really one of us, he is ours. As human beings, He is truly our child. In union with the *pater*, the priest, who holds him up, who receives the gifts, we beg the Paterfamilias of heaven: *Suscipe Domine!* We know that the Father is free. If we are wise, we enter into this moment realizing its action, its freedom, even if practice suggests there is no doubt in the outcome. It is nothing less than a moment that is thrilling! Yes, too often it goes unnoticed in practice. But now we know. Yes, the translation matters, and it is inescapably inculturated, for good or for ill: in this case for the good.

So, let us return to the beginning. But this time, not just to the *loquela*, the distinct way of speaking, but rather to that space of meaning and feeling so close to us, before we can even respond to it. There is an interesting phenomenon that people seem to experience when they are multi-lingual, as many Europeans are. You watch a movie, have a conversation, and years later all you remember is the meaning and the feeling. You can't seem to remember where you were or the language you heard it in! This reminds me of the advice once given by a Trappist, that when you pray with Scripture you have to go past the words to the Word, who is closer to us than our own language. Thankfully, this Word doesn't need any translation at all.

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