Ariana Harwicz - Mikaël Gómez Guthart - Sarah Moses

Seeing Without Being Seen

This is the conversation between French translator Mikaël Gómez Guthart, who during an anxiety attack, decided he would no longer speak French and use Spanish alone, and Argentine writer Ariana Harwicz, who fell in love with French and attempted to renounce Spanish. "The first time I met a translator I realized she suffered for the same reasons I did, and in the same way – a comma, an adjective, a turn of phrase," she says. He agrees. Marguerite Yourcenar said, "Every time the writer, or you might say the artist, completes a work, they feel as did the horseman in the German ballad when, after crossing frozen Lake Constance during the night, he realized it was a lake, and at dawn, fell from his horse at the fright of what he had done."

MGG: I still remember "my first time" as a translator very clearly, and fondly. In fact, it entailed two very different experiences. The first took place when I was around nine or ten years old, in the basement of a bar in the Montparnasse neighborhood in the south of Paris. It was an establishment exclusively for habitués; to get in, you had to knock on the door, and the owner would first look through the spyhole. In French, like in English, a "spyhole" is actually called a "judas" – seeing without being seen supposedly equates to betrayal. At any rate, I was there with my older brother, who didn't speak Spanish, and a friend of my father's from Spain, who didn't speak French. The two were having a heated argument about the Communist Party being blind to Stalinist crimes, the lies of the Soviet regime, etc.

AH: I was at the Avignon Festival once and saw a play about Stalin. During the play, Stalinist supporters outside were heard cheering for "the supreme leader." I'd just moved to France and thought the Stalinists were part of the play, so when it was over, I congratulated them. Well, it turned out they weren't actors. France has got to be the only country that was never communist and yet is nostalgic for communism.

MGG: That story could be taken straight out of a film by Chaplin or Tati! In any case, there are probably still people debating Stalinist crimes today, but back then it was very current: this was

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right between the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Soviet Union. Everyone smoked; it was like a scene from Howard Hawks' To Have and Have Not. I obviously didn't understand what was going on, but I was in the middle of it, translating what each of them was saying. And I remember the pleasure of being able to transform the words spoken by one person so they could be understood by another. That bar disappeared long ago, I asked about it a little while back and nobody, or almost nobody, remembers it. Now it's an art gallery. My father's friend from Spain disappeared as well, like the rest of the characters that populated that disconcerting place, and the smoke in all the bars in Paris. It's curious that the only people who remain, sometimes hidden, sometimes not, are the Stalinists.

The second experience took place at least a decade later, in a small town in Mexico. One night, a Korean engineering student offered me forty dollars to join him for a drink because he didn't speak Spanish and needed assistance. I didn't quite understand why he needed my help, but it seemed like an exciting adventure. What he really wanted was to buy ecstasy, so we went from one brothel to the next in search of the product in question. As you can see, in my case anyway, translation, or the position of an interpreter, if you will, is closely linked to a sort of clandestinity, and I'd even say a profound darkness.

AH: My first time as a writer, because I'm not a translator, I wouldn't be able to submerge myself in the text of another – that minimal quota of submission that's needed, and that inclination to cover oneself up – was when I was fourteen years old. It's a classic: My best friend was in love with a guy I liked who didn't like me back. She asked me to write him a letter declaring her love. I agreed to pretend to be her. I remember how I suffered the night I wrote the letter, and at the same the pleasure of it (though at fourteen I hadn't yet experienced sexual pleasure). He loved the letter and he and my friend started dating. To this day, I think about the power of having written something as another; how this won a person over. Ever since, I've tried to make use of the spell that is being someone else. I remember the feeling, which was so strong, of being able to bring two people together, or break them apart, and in particular, something even better, that writing could give rise to desire, invent desire, create it.

I think I have a fairly different relationship with translators than that of other contemporary writers because translation concerns me almost as much as writing. I mean I wouldn't want my novels in

other languages to be like bastard children. On more than one occasion I've even felt like a spy among translators, someone who's snuck in, without a membership card. Maybe if I didn't live in another language, I wouldn't have this relationship with my translated books and I could see them as the effect of another, as what they are, the writing of another. I try to think along with the translator to the extent that the translator lets me, which is sometimes quite a lot, and sometimes a little. It's like when a couple first starts having sex – you go as far as it's okay to go. But I do feel there's always a bond, a dependence, a loving relationship between the author, the text, and the translator. And this relationship – a loving one, if you will – is seen in the text. I'll tell you a story. When I was in Warsaw, I realized that the readers took my novel, Die, My Love, to be a local novel, and that naturally, they felt the character to be of Polish nationality. But the same thing happened to me in other countries – variations in the translations would transform the character from Romanian to Iraqi, or from Peruvian to Brazilian!

MGG: There should exist a category of writers, a sect, that create their work on the basis of their translators. Freud would apparently have been part of it. In a letter to Jones, he confessed to regret having written "das ich und das es" – "the ego and the id" – because he thought it impossible to recreate as such in English. He corresponded with his translators. Have you had a chance to meet any of yours?

AH: My translator into Polish didn't want to meet me. I was in Warsaw for a few talks at the university and at a theatre, and my editor – on seeing that I was excited, I imagine – told me she'd rather not. It felt like a date that didn't work out, like a poorly planned Tinder date. There should be a Tinder for authors and translators! I think she had a conspiracy theory or was superstitious and felt that meeting an author destroys the translated text or something to that effect. My first translation was into Hebrew, the language of my childhood, and the first time I heard it I understood that the translator had known how to listen to the music, that she'd known how to play it without hitting false notes, without demagogy, and this is a language I hardly speak.

MGG: The translator is unfaithful by nature, and I think that's just fine. Max Brod is an example that says it all: Besides being Franz Kafka's supposedly unfaithful friend, having not burnt his writings, Brod was a music critic for different German-language newspapers in Prague before the war. He was also a very productive novelist and wrote several essays, film scripts, plays, stories, etc.

Unfortunately, his work has, to a certain extent, faded into oblivion, and nowadays his name is almost always synonymous with “traitor.” At any rate, he knew a lot of composers and began to translate (he said “adapt”) operas for Leoš Janáček. Apparently, he didn’t just translate the Czech’s librettos into German – he “advised” Janáček on his compositions. He added his own ideas, changed titles, cut sentences he didn’t like, etc. In this case, he had a direct influence on the construction and dissemination of the work. It seems to me that’s exactly what he did with Kafka. In fact, it’s pretty clear that Kafka didn’t believe in Brod’s translations; there are a few particularly amusing letters he wrote to Felice Bauer where he says they’re actually “unbearable adaptations...” “The great defectors of language....” If I go down the rabbit hole, there’s no turning back! Are you familiar with Juan Rodolfo Wilcock? Edouard Roditi?

AH: Juan Rodolfo Wilcock is the perfect figure; he covers the whole arc of the translator’s experience, having also been a poet and critic, and with that surname, along with Juan and Rodolfo – I’ve no idea how they’d pronounce it here in France – he lacked for nothing. It’s as if Borges had returned and begot a son who became his translator. When Wilcock settled in Italy, he was involved in The Gospel According to St. Matthew by Pasolini, the philosopher, journalist, actor, novelist, playwright, painter, and another example of translation and adaptation in art or of art as an act of translation. Wilcock rewriting his own work in Italian brings the virtuous cycle to a close, I think. Around that time, he is said to have corresponded with Miguel Murmis and written: “I see Argentina as an immense translation.” This is someone who understood Argentina, wouldn’t you say? Edouard Roditi participated in the Nuremberg trials as an interpreter for the American army, which is really interesting considering he was André Breton’s translator into English – translating surrealism and the Nazis. Roditi, another example of the translator as the complete artist, a far cry from professional translators who accumulate commissions of multi-award-winning texts and have a good deal of visibility, it’s a sign of the times...

During this moment of visibility, we should come up with something like a list that’s “not visible” and not politically correct, a list of languages the publishing market objects to, and those it doesn’t. And those the literary field does and doesn’t, and a map of translations that enable and disable this use of languages, and of the political and demagogic uses of certain translations. From Spanish to

English and English to Spanish, from Greek to Dutch or Italian to Chinese, from Arabic to Hebrew or Portuguese to Russian? Which routes are favored and why?

MGG: We ought to create an up-to-date world map of the flow of translations by country and by language. In fact, Franco Moretti did something similar with his Atlas of the European Novel. In France, the great majority of translations in circulation are from English. A few years ago, I read that for the first time, the works of Shakespeare premiered in Yiddish in New York... we'd have to inquire. It's got to be false, historically, but it's a nice legend. What is certain is that Israel Joshua Singer, Bashevis' older brother, had tremendous success with his novel, The Brothers Ashkenazi, and its theatrical adaptation premiered in Yiddish all over the place. I came across an old newspaper with a review of the Parisian premiere of the play at the Théâtre de la Porte-Saint Martin in 1938; the critic expounds a pretty original theory: for him, the fact of not having understood the dialogue, which was of course in Yiddish – and this was the case for the majority of the audience – gave the play greater comedic strength. He adds that he probably would have found the work unbearable if it had been translated into French. A dose of misunderstanding might on occasion be necessary and even productive. Literature, life in general, really, needs "the sweetness of a mystery" – to revisit Proust's formula in Time Regained. I say this in all sincerity; I don't think we need to understand everything, right away, simultaneously. Mystery and secrets are two fundamental ingredients.

AH: Who decides which countries, cultures, and mentalities read which translations? And who decides which works need new translations and which ones don't? En route to which language does Virginia Woolf most become Virginia Woolf, Tolstoy most Tolstoy, Pablo Neruda most Pablo Neruda? I have a theory that's at the center of the war between the theocracy and secular democracy. But we're talking a personal theory here. It entails three ways to regard translation: You can be an atheist, a believer, or an agnostic. Believers would think that you can read Shakespeare in Russian or Spanish, and it's him, definitely, it's Shakespeare, we read him in every language. Agnostics would obviously have their doubts: When I read Shakespeare in Portuguese, it is him, and it isn't, I get to know him a little, I recognize him. And finally, there are the Schopenhauers of translation, the Ciorans, the atheists who would say: We'll never get to know Chekov if we don't read Russian, I'm sorry, but we're all going to die without reading Uncle Vanya,

best settle for our playwrights in our local language. This would be something akin to patriotic fervor, reading national books like waving the wee national flag.

MGG: I really like this bizarre holy trinity of yours: believers/agnostics/atheists... When it comes to translation, I guess I must be an atheist, though I don't like the word. A part-time atheist, rather, a Marrano of sorts. In part, I feel as you do; if we don't read Chekov or Kafka in their original languages, we only ever approach their work, and yet I also believe that regardless it's absolutely necessary for works to circulate. In The World Reformer, Thomas Bernhard writes, "Translators disfigure originals. What is translated only ever arrives on the market as a deformation. It is the translator's dilettantism and filth that make a translation so repulsive. What is translated is always revolting." This is what translation entails, in my opinion, this is it exactly: a deformation.

AH: In which register did you write the work? Authors are often asked at festivals and fairs, as though they were being interrogated by the Stasi. Is it colloquial, lyrical? In which tone of voice do you write – soprano, tenor, contralto, baritone? In which tempo – andante, allegro, adagio? All of this needs to be captured by the antenna of the translation as does something that's not in the text, that the author can't be asked, that can't be read in biographies, and that's the mystery of every work. The writer should be subjected only to their style and their syntax, whether the latter is migrant, orthodox, polygamous; the rest is politics. The writer's ethics, the translator's ethics...

MGG: I wouldn't say there are good translations or bad ones – translating is simply a form of reading. Perhaps an inquisitive approach to reading. We can debate such-and-such a translator's interpretation, his or her reading may or may not convince us, but ultimately, a translation ends up being a simple proposal. If my memory serves, Borges's advice for young writers was to preferably read the classics, and to read translations. The style of the latter may be bad, he felt, but the line of thinking would probably be good because in a translation, what matters to the reader is knowing who to admire.

AH: In an essay, Klemperer tells how when the war was over, at the end of the summer of 1945, he noticed how the staunchest opponents of Nazism spoke the language of Nazism, how their rhetoric reeked of Nazism. I think this is the political battle the writer fights: to not write in the language of power, to be conscious of the language obeyed, of the ways in which one is a slave, and especially to not be silenced if the language chosen isn't that which has been accepted. Many

German writers have made and continue to make de-Natzifying the language their poetics. For good or ill, the translator perhaps suffers the same fate.

I think of all the literature at the limit of the word, like Blanchot, who was always at the edge of silence, and of nullifying, of resisting, the writer figure and the identity of the so-called author. Blanchot said something that I've always liked and that's helped me write dialogue: "The drama, and the strength, in all 'true' confessions is that one begins to speak only in view of the moment in which one cannot continue..." And I think of Wittgenstein, who's like the star of mutism now that philosophers are contemporary stars with millions of fans. When I was a philosophy student, I remember not talking for a week to imitate him. It should be said that this I attempted without sleeping so as to connect myself to the surrealists' experiences. At the age of nineteen, I obviously understood that the limit the avant-garde seek, the limit they seek in language, can't be imitated. And I think of Aharon Appelfeld, of his mutism, his stutter, and the speech disorders that shaped his writing. With Appelfeld, the whole drama of a native language and an adopted one played out in an exponential manner and involved the physical effort that learning Hebrew and casting aside his native language entailed. He told it well: the generation for whom abandoning one's native tongue wasn't only a question of politics but of existentialism. For me, this is the crux of the statement that writing makes. I remember the diary of a prisoner in the Warsaw Ghetto and having read, "No more words, no more words, no more words."

MGG: In the epilogue to the first French paperback of Louis-René des Forêts's The Bavard, Maurice Blanchot suggests the work is a ghost story in which even the ghost itself is absent. Louis-René des Forêts barely spoke, the same goes for Blanchot, incidentally, and the work, which was his masterpiece, is a one-hundred-page logorrhea of a man who talks to himself. Apparently, it was the last book Georges Bataille read before he died.

AH: Recently, I went to see an exhibit at the Bibliothèque National de France that contained manuscripts of convicts, inmates, the dying, all from different centuries. Some were on their way to the electric chair; others were awaiting the guillotine, some were terminally ill, the political prisoners of the resistance, others were suffering from love à la Goethe (which is almost the same thing, if one suffers well), but, all the writings, on paper, on a wall, in blood, in hidden notebooks, on the underside of a chair, were thus related: the limit of writing.

MGG: A few years ago, I went to a talk given by Aharon Appelfeld and Norman Manea and they spoke, respectively, Hebrew and Romanian. I found it quite remarkable that the lingua franca between an Israeli survivor of the Shoah and a Romanian exiled in the United States was German. A lot could be said about the relationship between confinement, writing, and translation. From Cervantes's captivity in Algeria and the Siberian imprisonment of Dostoevsky, to Julius Margolin and Avrom Sutzkever's testimonies of their experiences in concentration camps. Not long ago, in the diary of Czechoslovakian dissident Jan Zabrana, I read: "Is it that surprising that so many have become stupefied inside this prison? Everyone ended up a translator. Everyone. I was the first."



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