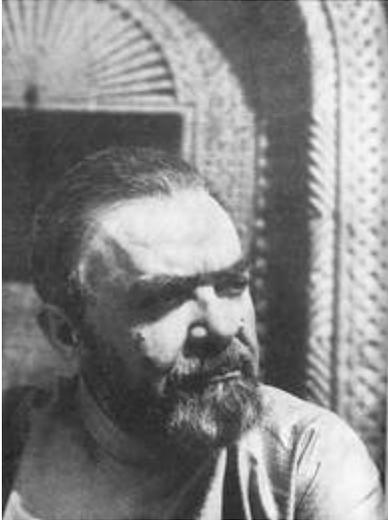


Critics' Forum

Literature

Gevorg Emin: The Task of the Translator

By Hovig Tchalian



In a famous essay entitled “The Task of the Translator” (1923), the German-Jewish cultural critic, Walter Benjamin (1892-1940), describes “bad” translation as “the inaccurate transmission of an inessential content.”

The statement concludes the following discussion: “What does a literary work ‘say?’ What does it communicate? It ‘tells’ very little to those who understand it. Its essential quality is not statement or the imparting of information. Yet any translation which intends to perform a transmitting function cannot transmit anything but information – hence, something inessential. This is the hallmark of bad translations.”

In other words, a bad translation is concerned only with the meaning *of* the text – the “information” or “inessential content” – rather than what we might call the meaning *behind* it. This is particularly the case with the translation of poetic texts, where the question of meaning is itself in play. Benjamin’s formulation suggests the possibility that a bad translation will likely get even the basic “layer” of meaning wrong and transmit it “inaccurately.” For Benjamin, the “true” translation will fit the original as two constellations of stars intermingle to form a larger whole, the translation enhancing, instead of detracting from, the complex meaning (or meanings) of the original.

Benjamin’s definition, idiosyncratic and personal as it is, suggests something entirely new about the act of translating, and consequently about the task of the translator – that once a “good” translation is produced, it becomes impossible to see the original the same way again; that, in a sense, there is no necessary reason for the original work to take precedence over the translation, since, to extend Benjamin’s metaphor, they are now both

part of the same universe. In this way, the translator's task is transformed into a partnership with the poet, a silent collaboration that expands the boundaries of the poet's own creative act. It is no wonder that so many translators of poetry are themselves poets.

This is the case with the translation of many of Gevorg Emin's (b. 1919) poems. The most well-known have been translated by Diana Der Hovanessian, an Armenian-born New England poet who has also translated the work of other Armenian poets, including Vahan Derian.

A 1985 volume entitled "For You on New Year's Day" (no longer available in print) collects a number of translations of Emin's shorter poems. A poem in it, "Your Hands" ("Koh Tserkehreh"), is worth looking at more closely:

I love your hands
which hold me,
held me,
for so many years,
without
binding me,

hands which make
me master
without mastering me,

encircle
without
strangling me,

lift me
the way the drowning
man is lifted,

hands
whose cupped shells
change me
slowly slowly
into the pearl
they wanted
all the time.

In a number of respects, the poem is a faithful translation of the original, an accurate rendering of "information," in Benjamin's definition. But even in the very first stanza, there seems to be a problem with the translation, even at this most basic "level" of meaning. Emin's original (transliterated), says:

Yehs siroum em koh tserkehreh,
Voronk,
Arten kahni dari,
Indz amenits amour kergoum,
Sagayn yerpehk chen ... pandargoum.

Der Hovanesian translates “Voronk / Arten kahni dari” somewhat awkwardly as “which hold me, / held me, / for so many years.” The problem in this particular line is not so much the faithfulness of the translation as the awkwardness of the English. In struggling with the original, it seems, the poet has been flung back and has landed awkwardly in her corner.

The translator’s task is by no means an easy one, and certainly in this case (exemplified by the equally awkward transliteration above). By way of comparison, another translation of the same lines by Martin Robbins and Tatul Sonentz-Papazian (*Land, Love, Century*, 1988) renders the lines this way: “...which for so many years now / hold me / but never capture me.” This version is perhaps more faithful to the original, “so many years now” representing an interesting rendition of “Arten kahni dari.” But it seems that Emin’s “arten” has nevertheless thrown the rest of the English into disarray. In this case, the awkwardness lies in the “hold me,” which would perhaps be better rendered as “have held me.” In both translations, the difficulty of the lines on the literal level, the level of accuracy (not alone a hallmark of great translations in any case, according to Benjamin), has somehow also affected the poetic “spirit” of the original, turning a collaborative dance between translator and poet into a rough-and-tumble struggle. The result is that both the Armenian original and its English translation have not been brought closer together but instead feel permanently estranged.

Der Hovanesian’s last few lines, “...the pearl / they wanted / all the time,” suffer from the same problems as the first. They are both awkward on their own (should the last two lines read instead, “they wanted all along”?) and a questionable translation of the original (“markarid em kich-kich tarnum...”). On the other hand, the line “lift me / the way the drowning / man is lifted” is crisper, more immediate, not least because it sounds somehow “right” in English.

It is easy to quibble with translations. But the larger concern brings us full circle, back to Benjamin’s attempt to broaden the definition of translation and, in doing so, enrich the task of the translator. With that in mind, it is not too far-fetched to suggest that the task of the translator and that of the audience she and the poet address together concerns neither the faithfulness to an Armenian original nor simply the elegance of any English translation. As Benjamin surmised long ago, the central question concerns the interplay between two languages, two constellations – the Armenian and the English, indeed, the Armenian and the non-Armenian.

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