

Lost in Translation

Jeff King

It all started with a bald statement made by a literature-loving friend as we defied the cold over *suizos* in Barcelona's Cafè de l'Òpera on an unseasonably fresh spring morning. A bright, articulate Londoner whose use of her mother tongue is a delight, but who is decidedly monolingual, she purred, 'I adore Marcel Proust.' It was a sentiment I had heard countless times, my friend's three-decade love affair with the tortured Frenchman having lasted far longer than any of her relationships with living, breathing souls. 'He is the most nuanced writer of emotion ever,' she added, the frothing chocolate cream on her lips adding an almost erotic charge to her declaration of undying love.

'But how do you know that?' I asked her. 'You don't speak a word of French.' She parried my question with arched eyebrows and a dismissive shrug, and that particular conversation went no further. But a couple of days later, sat on my coffin-sized, Bougainvillea-covered balcony in Horta, struggling with a wooden translation of Jean-Paul Sartre's *The Age of Reason*, I revisited the exchange, my thoughts turning back to Proust. If the author of *In Search of Lost Time*, famously, takes 30 pages to describe how a character turns over in his bed before going to sleep at night, then surely his value is primarily, if not exclusively, about the use of language. And what goes for Proust in French, goes for James Joyce and Jack Kerouac in English or Camilo José Cela and Gabriel García Márquez in Spanish. Which begs the question, unless we understand a language, can we ever really get under the skin of its literature?

The American poet Robert Frost defined poetry as a thing that gets lost in translation, an observation, I believe, that can be extended to literary fiction. These days, literature in translation is a labyrinth of frustrating journeys I largely avoid. As an earnest young man, I devoured all the usual suspects in translation – Flaubert, Zola, Camus, Dostoevsky, Solzhenitsyn; but over the last two decades I have barely turned a translated page in anger. I am not alone. In the USA and Britain only two percent of books published every year are literary translations. Cultural prejudice, political insularity and the economic bottom line all contribute to that revelatory statistic, but my own

circumstantial alibi is purely aesthetic. Yes, I want fiction to entertain me, move me and challenge me, but above all, what I really cherish is language; the beauty of great prose. And the truth is, literature in translation has let me down so many times that I rarely make the effort any more.

I am in good company: Cervantes, no less, compared reading a translation to looking at a tapestry from the back. You don't have to dig very deep in his own magnum opus to see what he means. The opening sentence of *Don Quixote* gives us the most famous words ever written in Spanish: 'En un lugar de la Mancha, de cuyo nombre no quiero acordarme'. Edith Grossman, whose translation of *Don Quixote* is widely considered as definitive, translated it like this: 'Somewhere in La Mancha, in a place whose name I do not care to remember'. Which sounds more like the stilted language of a Victorian governess than the musings of a delusional knight-errant in early 1600s Spain. And that's just the opening line of a 400,000-word opus. As for our long-winded friend Proust, different translators cannot even agree on the titles: is it *Remembrance of Things Past* or *In Search of Lost Time*? *Swann's Way* or *The Way by Swann*? *Within a Budding Grove* or *In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower*?

Over the last year I have read just three books which were not written in English or Spanish by authors writing in their native language. Sartre's translator has the characters speak like they have stepped out of the pages of P.G. Wodehouse rather than 1940s Paris, full as the translation is of by joves, jolly goods and old boys. *Palace Walk* by the Egyptian Naguib Mahfouz was so ungainly I threw in the towel after barely 100 pages. *Snow* by the Turkish writer Orhan Pamuk was no better. All three works are excruciatingly clunky, but is that down to Sartre, Mahfouz and Pamuk – all three of them, lest we forget, Noble Prize winners; or was it the fault of their respective translators? The truth is I will never know. Because I wasn't reading that illustrious trio, I was reading someone else's interpretation of their words. And, that, I am afraid, is the literary version of karaoke.

We all accept that translation is not merely word for word transcription, otherwise publishers would just type manuscripts into Google Translate and let it spit out gobbledygook. Flesh and blood translators rewrite, or interpret, in their own language a work originally created in a second language, hoping that readers of the translation will 'get' the text in the same way that the original language readers do. Of course, what this implies is a series of creative decisions. Borges reportedly told his English translator

not to write what he said but what he meant to say. To the core language and writing skills required of a translator, add the ability to mind read.

It may seem rude to mention it, but missing crystal balls aside, there is one undeniable problem with translators: they rarely cut it as writers in their own right. For every Paul Bowles, Paul Auster or Milan Kundera, great authors who have also dabbled in translation, there are hundreds of journeymen writers working as translators. These men and women are the literary equivalent of lounge pianists on a cruise ship. If they were capable of creating their own valid works, they would not waste their time translating somebody else's. No great writer ever abandoned original work for translation; apart from anything else, the latter pays a pittance. And no, I am not on a mission to slate translators. I know from personal experience that translation is immensely difficult. In fact, I would argue that writing in a foreign language is actually far easier than translating it.

Too often, though, translators are merely people who know two languages; but just because you understand a language doesn't mean you can translate that knowledge into decent prose. We all understand our mother tongue, but how many of us can write well in it? Carlos Ruiz Zafón and Ildefonso Falcones, Barcelona's most universal authors, are both bilingual but nonetheless choose to write in Spanish and leave the Catalan version to a translator. Awareness of their own limitations in the latter, perchance? Most leading fiction writers from Catalonia write in either Catalan or Spanish, not both. In fact, a list of great bilingual writers is a short one. Of the truly great writers in English, only Beckett and Nabokov also wrote in a second language; French and Russian, respectively.

Javier Marías is Spain's pre-eminent literary Anglophile and has translated Shakespeare, Nabokov, Kipling and Hardy, among others, into Spanish. But even he recognises the limitations involved. The protagonists of his novels written since 1986 are all interpreters or translators of one kind or another. Of these protagonists, Marías has written, 'They are people who are renouncing their own voices. What you're asked to do when you're a translator is to rewrite acceptably, that is to say, well, something marvellous already written in a different language. You have to choose every word. And like an actor, you have to renounce your own style.' Note the compromise; 'marvellous' becomes 'acceptable', or at best, something you do 'well'.

The renowned American translator Lydia Davis is another unwitting witness for the prosecution: 'Translation involves compromise: sometimes

word order has to be sacrificed, sometimes punctuation, sometimes rhythm, sometimes alliteration; sometimes the passive voice becomes active, sometimes words will be a shade off in meaning.’ Which rather begs the question, after so much compromise what is left of the original in terms of language?

The opening pages of Jennifer Egan’s 2011 Pulitzer Prize-winning *A Visit from the Goon Squad* revolve around a character named Sasha, a music biz executive who also happens to be a kleptomaniac. She has just stolen a woman’s purse in the toilets of an upmarket Manhattan restaurant. ‘Postwallet, the scene tingled with mirthful possibility. Sasha felt the waiters eyeing her as she sidled back to the table holding her handbag with its secret weight. She sat down and took a sip of her Melon Madness Martini and cocked her head at Alex. She smiled her yes/no smile. ‘Hello,’ she said.’ Egan chooses her words with care.’ The scene tingled with mirthful possibility’; not say, the more prosaic ‘it was an amusing situation’. The fact that the waiters were ‘eyeing her’ hints at something ‘looking at her’ would not begin to suggest. She ‘sidled’ back to the table and ‘cocked’ her head bring a richness to the paragraph more humdrum verbs wouldn’t. The book hasn’t been translated into yet, but one thing is certain, whoever translates it will not be in Egan’s league as a writer. Ten Euros says that the translation of the above paragraph will feature far more prosaic language than the original. Oh, and Egan took five years to write it; the translator will be lucky to get five weeks.

Musing on my balcony in Horta, I decided to test my theory about plodding translations at the most basic level; not by a detailed comparison of translations in and out of the two languages I speak fluently – but with the building blocks of any language; words. I decided that every time I read a word in English fiction that instinct told me had no satisfactory translation into Spanish, I would write it down. I have been flabbergasted by the results. Within weeks, the list was running into the hundreds. Four months later it numbers over 2,000. And just to be clear, I haven’t been reading centuries-old literature riddled with outmoded vocabulary. Every single word on the list is taken from a contemporary source: Joseph O’Neill, Philip Roth, Andrea Levy, Ian McEwan, Evelyn Waugh, Graham Greene, John le Carré, Richard Yates, Ian Fleming, J.M. Coetzee, Alan Hollinghurst are all among the authors.

What struck me immediately is how often the words I noted were used

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to describe character. Here is a random list of descriptive adjectives that I jotted down as having no precise translation: aloof, arresting, avuncular, artless, baleful, bashful, blousy, bolshy, brooding, bumptious, churlish, crackpot, cranky, cloying, cowed, coy, demure, disarming, donnish, dotty, dowdy, droll, fawning, feckless, feisty, fey, fickle, foxy, hapless, kooky, lairy, mawkish, mousy, oafish, peevish, plucky, quaint, quirky, sassy, seedy, smarmy, smug, snide, swanky, tongue in cheek, twee, wayward, whimsical, wry. Instinct failed to give me an instant translation for these words; and subsequent checking confirmed my suspicions. Sometimes dictionary definitions were too general, sometimes they contained only a partial sense of the word, other times they were just plain wrong. And let's not even get into the problems of context and appropriate use.

My best, back-breaking dictionary translates aloof as 'distante' or 'frío', which is fine as far as it goes, but gives no hint of the unsympathetic or supercilious meaning inherent in the word. Avuncular is translated as 'paternal, amistoso'; again, not bad, but it offers no clues as to which gender it applies to. Bashful = 'penoso'? Not even close. Disarming is translated as 'cautivador' which, in fact, is more like captivating. Droll is given as 'chistoso', 'curioso' and 'gracioso', none of which capture the essence of a word that describes dry, intelligent humour. If the opening sentence of a book described the leading character as droll, English readers would have an immediate and very precise perception of the character. Translated as 'chistoso', the Spanish reader would have an entirely different mental picture. And it is fair to say that Los Morancos, say, might be funny but they are hardly droll.

A coy person is reluctant to give information or pretends to be shy in order to make themselves seem more attractive; 'tímido' or 'coquetón' offer clues to that meaning, but only vague ones. Hapless is not just 'desafortunado', it also describes a person you feel sorry for because bad things have happened to them. Crackpot, dotty and kooky are all translated as 'chiflado', but which would be used to describe respectively, a teenager, an ageing aunt, or a person with excentric ideas? Artless is not 'tosco'. Mousy is neither 'achicado' or 'tímido'. Bumptious is not 'engreido'. Churlish is not merely 'grosero'. 'Sórdido' is sordid which is not exactly the same as its dictionary translation, seedy. Cranky is not 'maniático'. Fickle and 'veleidoso' are not the same. Peevish is not 'fastidioso', quaint is not 'curioso', mawkish is not 'empalagoso', oafish is not 'torpe' or 'lerdo'. Smug is not 'petulante', snide

is not ‘sarcástico’, swanky is not ‘fanfarrón’ ...etc, etc, etc. And here’s an afterthought (which is not ‘una reflexión’), smarmy is not ‘cobista’, ‘pelota’, ‘adulón’ or ‘meloso’ – when a dictionary uses four words with different meanings to translate one, you know you are in trouble.

If you cannot translate the way a writer describes character, how much nuance does the reader of a translation lose? Nouns, you would think, are less problematic; after all, a bed is a bed is a bed (unless it is a Tracey Emin, and then it is a work of art). Think again. A native English reader will read any of the following words and create an instantaneous mental picture of the character: an anorak, a braggart, a bungler, a bully, a busybody, a chav, a chancer, a closet queen, a commuter, a curmudgeon, a control freak, a deadbeat, a drama queen, a fag hag, a fuddy-duddy, a geek, a jobsworth, a mover and shaker, a nerd, a peer, a rake, a scandal-monger, a slob, a social cripple, a straight man, a wag, a waif, a wallflower. Translated (where possible) into another language and those instinctive perceptions are invariably lost.

Even more complicated than individual words are collocations. How to translate a blot on the landscape, to champ at the bit, flotsam and jetsam, neat and tidy, nook and cranny, pomp and circumstance, prim and proper, or a stickler for detail? Plucky, another of the words on my list, translates as ‘valiente’. Now Rafa Nadal is celebrated for his courage but you would never describe him as plucky because he is not an underdog, as in the collocation, plucky underdog.

Verbs are slightly less problematic, but can still be a minefield. To cajole, carp, case, cavort, chastise, chide, chivvy, coax, commute, connive, cow, crave, cringe, curb, and cherish are all words struggling for a natural translation into Spanish, and these are just verbs on my list beginning with the letter ‘c’. As for phrasal verbs, you could dedicate a whole issue of *Barcelona Ink* to the charms of translating those slippery characters.

The richer the prose – the very thing that distinguishes literature from popular fiction; a Martin Amis from a Ken Follet, or a Jonathan Franzen from a Dan Brown – the harder it gets. To cite a few examples from Amis’s latest novel, *The Pregnant Widow*, how the hell do you begin to translate Little Shit Syndrome ... Lazy Bastard Disorder ... a slippage of genre ... positively debonair about defecation ... blares of rage and boredom quailed and dried in their throats ... a mug’s game ... a hissy-fit ... the hoi polloi ... wanderlust ... overpriced tat? And these are just odd words and phrases, not long convoluted sentences and paragraphs.

Rhythm (compare, say, the long, flowing phrases of Faulkner with the short, crisp phrases of Hemingway) and tone (colloquialisms, cadence, slang, elegance, formality) are other common victims of reinterpretation in another language. Whole books are lost causes without their individual tone of voice. Jack Kerouac's rambling streams of consciousness are what defines his books; you could sum up the plot of *On The Road* in a sentence and not leave much to the imagination. Some American writers – Don DeLillo, James Ellroy – use language and idioms that resonate with time and place to such a degree that even an English reader struggles to capture all the nuances. On the other side of the Atlantic's literary divide, the purple prose of John Fowles or AS Byatt is a translator's nightmare.

Dialogue can be especially tricky. It often contains nuances of class, race, age, status and education that are almost impossible to translate. Even exchanges as seemingly basic as greetings – hello, hi, good day, wotcha, what's up, all right, how do you do – and farewells – ta, ta, see you, cheerio, good night, goodbye, bye, later – tell an English reader a significant amount about character, information which is lost in translation. One of my favourite novels of the last twenty years, Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*, derives almost all of its power and emotion from the faux upper class/underclass cadence of its first person narrator, the butler Mr. Stevens. And that really is untranslatable. Likewise, regional accents and dialects have no direct equivalents: there is always something disturbing about hearing a Spanish detective sounding like a Cockney or a French nobleman spouting off like an English toff.

Cultural barriers are often insurmountable, too. Humour rarely translates, either culturally or linguistically. How to translate the difference between funny and amusing, witty and humorous, comical and hysterical? Are ironic, wry, playful, bleak, black, slapstick, insolent, impudent, cheeky and satirical humour all merely 'divertido' or 'gracioso'? In fact, whole swathes of popular culture get lost in translation. Naff is not 'hortero' or 'chungo'; it is a concept not a word, and how do you translate concepts? What a Catalan finds 'hortero' or 'chungo' invariably differs from what an English person considers naff. We all know that the Spanish use of 'friki' bares only a passing resemblance to the English original, freak. Spanish writers and filmmakers are obsessed with works about rites of passage – but much as I have tried, I have always failed to translate rites of passage in a pithy way. This has

nothing to do with the richness of English. Every language has words which are richer, more seductive or more powerful than their equivalents or near equivalents in other languages. It is no coincidence that the English have plundered *faux pas*, *laissez-faire*, *menage a trois*, *zeitgeist* and *schadenfreude*. When I am with English friends in Barcelona we throw scores of Spanish and Catalan words into the conversation because they are more expressive than their translations - here's to *morbo*, *marcha*, *melómano*, *soso*, *chupado* and *inquietudes*. No *fotis!* and *Mecachis!* Ya.

The Anglo-Saxon literary establishment has embraced Roberto Bolaño as they have embraced no Spanish language writer for a generation, waxing lyrical about his flowing prose and exhilarating language, but again, unless they can read Spanish (which it is safe to assume the vast majority of Anglo-critics don't), how do they know? 'Bolaño is not really from any one place, but is a sort of international, post-nationalist writer with strong emotional ties to Chile, Mexico and Spain,' says Natasha Wimmer, who translated *Los Detectives Salvajes* into English. 'He's not just steeped in his own national literature and drama, but is more wide-ranging and global, especially in his later books, and language-wise he draws on the colloquialisms and slang of all three countries.' Now you would need a pretty acute ear for your own language to capture the nuances of three sets of slang, but how can you possibly convey that in a translation without losing the potency of the original prose? The answer is simple, you cannot.

Juan Marsé is literature's master chronicler of post-war Barcelona, or to be more accurate, the opposing post-war Barcelonas; worlds represented in his work by Guinardó/Carmelo and San Gervasio, barely a couple of kilometres apart geographically but effectively two different universes. The first chapter of his early classic, *Últimas Tardes Con Teresa*, opens like this. 'Hay apodos que ilustran no solamente una manera de vivir, sino también la naturaleza social del mundo en que uno vive. La noche del 23 de junio de 1956, verbena de San Juan, el llamado Pijoaparte surgió de las sombras de su barrio vestido con un flamante traje de verano color canela.' How to begin to translate the nickname El Pijoaparte, let alone do so in a way that illustrates 'the lifestyle and social background' of the character to a non-Spanish reader? None of the characters in Marsé's work have accidental names; Maruja, Teresa, Manolo, Serrat, Lola ... all suggest something about the origins and/or character of the protagonists. The two central characters

in *Últimas Tardes Con Teresa* are the 'pija' Teresa and the 'xarnego' Manolo, el Pijoaparte. Again, 'pija' and 'xarnego' are words rich in meaning that are almost impossible for a non-native to capture once translated. Marsé's Barcelona is populated by 'golfos, murcianos, cabrones, catetos, memas, bledas, cursis, panolis, pipiolos, zalameros, marmotas, marranos, repajoleras'; El Pijoaparte describes his best friend as 'feo de narices'! This vocabulary, part of Marsé's richly woven lyrical landscapes, is almost impossible to capture in translation. El Pijoaparte spends much of the book 'cagando en la leche, su padre, sus muertos' and anybody else that gets in his way; phrases which are almost impossible to translate without reams of notes on their religious and scatological origins.

Later in the first chapter, el Pijoaparte is spotted tearing home on a stolen scooter by the jilted Lola. 'Se cruzó con el Pijoaparte al bajar hacia la plaza Sanllehy, en una de las revueltas de la carretera del Carmelo: abstraído, remoto, los negros cabellos revoloteando al viento como los alones de un pajarraco, aguileño por la imperiosa reflexión y por la misma velocidad endiablada que llevó durante todo el viaje, el perfil del murciano se abría como un mascarón de proa en medio de la cruda luz de la mañana. Lo único que la muchacha pudo ver, envuelta en el ruido ensordecido de la Ossa, fue un repentino perfil de ave de presa volando sobre el manillar, retenido durante una fracción de segundo con un parpadeo de asombro.'

This is the kind of majestic prose which secured Marsé the 2008 Premio Cervantes. But he writes very slowly, barely a novel every 4 or 5 years, rewriting everything over and over again. Many of his books have never been translated into English. But if they were, how much time would the translator – a person who, it is fair to say, would be a vastly inferior writer to Marsé – have to rewrite them? Marsé's English editor James Gurbutt, at Harvill Secker, says, 'He is a fantastic writer – if ever you want to read a novel about post-civil war Spain he's your man. It's difficult to find an audience for him over here, but he is one of the greats ... Literature in translation is very tough, and at times like this it's even tougher.'

The raw data itself of English makes translation uniquely difficult, too. The new online edition of the Oxford English Dictionary lists 500,000 words. A further half million technical and scientific words remain uncatalogued. Whole areas of vocabulary, business being a prime example – networking, bonding, marketing, etc. – simply don't get translated, just mispronounced. By contrast, German scores a vocabulary of 185,000 words, French fewer

than 100,000. The English to Spanish words ratio is generally considered to be two to one.

Of course, it is not just words but the whole structure of language getting in the way of decent translation. Where languages have similar roots, structure can be replicated to a large degree. The translation of a work from Catalan to Spanish or French poses few structural challenges, but what about from Catalan to Arabic, Chinese or Basque and vice versa – languages which bear little or no similarity in the way sentences are constructed? Academics have noted Proust's distinctive use of the perfect tense, most famously in his first sentence: 'Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure.' The original English translation in 1922 opted for 'For a long time I would go to bed early,' the more recent Penguin edition for: 'For a long time, I went to bed early.' Equally, they might have opted for 'For a long time I used to go to bed early,' or 'Time was when I went to bed early' or 'Time and again, I have gone to bed early.' Alternatively, there is the option offered by one wag when Penguin asked visitors to its Proust website to have a go at translating the first sentence; 'For absolutely bloody ages it was lights out early.' To which I might add, and that is only one bloody sentence.

So, call me narrow-minded, but I will continue to abstain from translations and stick to reading literature in English or Spanish in its original form. PC evangelists might accuse me of erecting cultural barriers, of shutting doors on uncharted experiences, but I read for aesthetic reasons, not sociological or political ones. I am not interested in cross-fertilisation if all it produces are works so clumsy or dissonant they are painful to read. And the reality is that there is not enough time to read all the good books published in a single language in one year. I have yet to read anything by William Golding, Joseph Conrad, D.H. Lawrence, William Burroughs, Henry Fielding or Doris Lessing, to name just a few giants of the literary canon. And then there are countless old friends – Dickens, Emily Brontë, John Dos Passos, Patrick Hamilton, Raúl Núñez, Eduardo Mendoza – that I haven't revisited in years. Of course, books in their original language can also be a huge letdown. I have just finished reading Howard Jacobson's *The Finkler Question*, a book which provokes a second question: how the hell did such a turgid piece of writing win last year's Booker Prize? But at least with bad books written in English, I know who to blame.

The Insular Plight of Homo Anglo-Saxo in Hock to Authenticity

Peter Bush

Lightly scratch the witty gloss of self-styled aesthete Jeff King's diatribe against literary translation and you soon hit that combination of ignorance, chauvinist self-sufficiency and sense of superiority that is the mark of *homo anglo-saxo* in the worst traditions of the English chattering classes.

But first let's examine his claim to be able to get under the 'skin' of literature and his cherishing of great prose. Close reading of the latter doesn't seem to be his forte and it's not the fault of any translator.

His comments on *Don Quixote* reveal an egregious ability to miss the point. Cervantes doesn't compare reading a translation to looking at the reverse of a tapestry. His character, Don Quixote, makes that statement and it is doubly ironic. Cervantes's narrator (who isn't simply Miguel de Cervantes) has told us that his novel is in fact a translation from the Arabic and the perceptive reader knows that this pseudo-translation is full of bits that are hanging out and that these hanging threads comprise some of the novel's many claims to artistic originality...

And what about that famous first sentence? King takes a bash at Edith Grossman's rendering as sounding 'more like the stilted language of a Victorian governess than the musings of a delusional knight-errant in early 1600s Spain'. I wouldn't vouch for the accuracy of his evaluation of the supple or otherwise use of English by Victorian governesses if his take on the hidalgo is anything to go by. This is not Don Quixote musing; it is the ironic voice of the narrator introducing his fictional protagonist. A tiresome detail overlooked by our aesthete in search of scintillating *boutades*. And this is just his second page.

Sloppiness of thought spills out from the edges of his less than critically incisive commentary. He is fond of assertions that sound portentous to give the impression that hard knowledge is driving his argument towards lapidary conclusions as in translation being 'the literary version of karaoke'. He tells us that Grossman's translation is 'widely considered as definitive', rather than informing us that this judgement is largely based on Harold Bloom's

preface, or comparing it, say, to other translations of *Don Quixote* that have been published in the new millennium, like John Rutherford's, by Penguin. And then Borges 'reportedly' told his translator 'not to write what he said but what he meant to say'. Well, did he or didn't he? After all, Norman di Giovanni has written a whole book on the subject of his relationship with the blind storyteller from Buenos Aires (translator of Faulkner and Walt Whitman) who, by the way, preferred translations to the originals. Is this analysis by hearsay? Is he blind to irony?

In his own backyard in Barcelona, King ventures to put more flesh on his insights and is bafflingly at sea; perhaps he's growing more than bougainvillea in his coffin in Horta? Zafón and Falcones are the city's most 'universal' authors, he claims. Possibly 'best-selling' is the word he's looking for and possibly that's why they chose to write in Spanish and not Catalan, it being the fast-track to fame and fortune, and, tut-tut, to translation into English where it is often claimed they were much improved by their excellent English translators, Lucia Graves and Nick Caistor, respectively. It may be that leading fiction writers in Catalonia choose not to write either in Catalan or Spanish, but that doesn't stop them from trying their hand at translation. Quim Monzó, for example, has translated Thomas Hardy, Ray Bradbury and J. D. Salinger among others and Javier Cercas has translated Quim Monzó.

This aesthete regally shoots himself in the foot at every stage. We can hardly take seriously his jibe at literary translators as 'the literary equivalent of lounge pianists on a cruise ship' when he follows up with yet another of his grand assertions: 'No great writer ever abandoned original work for translation; apart from anything else, the latter pays a pittance.' Certainly, Lydia Davis and Javier Marías, names he enlists to his cause, are two writers who have at times decided to translate when they could have been penning their next fiction to pay for Manhattan penthouses. Julio Cortázar, Carles Riba, Joan Sales and Octavio Paz spring to mind as other great writers who translated, thought translation was possible, and even reflected that translation was an art that helped them to be better writers.

However, it is when he begins on his lists of adjectives that he believes have no 'precise' translation that we begin the slide into the very English cult of linguistic and cultural self-sufficiency/superiority and ignorance of the process of literary translation. The latter is not about finding dictionary equivalents: it is about translating nuances in context, as part of the music

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of words in sentences, in paragraphs, in chapters (if the author employs such conventions) that constitute the whole narrative. Such a project requires many drafts, research of various kinds, possible interactions with writers and editors, and the ability and necessary boldness to write in a wide variety of different styles. The closest possible reading of a text is coupled with the greatest inventiveness in its recreation. The literary translator is involved in a unique form of interpretative writing and that leads us bang into another cult, that of authenticity.

King seems to be under the impression that when he reads a literary text in English, he is reading transparently as any full-blooded Englishman would. He tells us that if a 'native English reader' sees a word such as 'anorak', then he will create an 'instantaneous mental picture' of the character and that translation into another language will invariably lose these 'instinctive perceptions', and, equally, verbs such as 'crave' and 'cringe' have no 'natural translation' into Spanish. Hmm, native, instinctive, natural, as if literary language wasn't about artifice and the creation of a language that is not the common currency of everyday communication?

In any case, aren't there millions of individual perceptions of anoraks (mine, for what they're worth, are immediately – in thirty seconds – worn by my Leavisite English teacher, rucksack on back, walking past the Odeon cinema in my home town in 1962, by a young black revolutionary in Balham in 1972, or by a demonstrating anti-nuclear granny in 1989). In fact, millions of multiple images provoked by one word across the nation... Let alone the specific resonances an author will draw on in the construction of a specific character, theme, image or metaphor and the individual resonances and images he or she will feel and see when reading that word in that huge chain of words that make up a fiction, most of which will remain opaque to eventual readers and critics. So there's a lot of controlled spontaneity in a work of literature and a lot of nonsense written about the instinctive, unmediated, nay, authentic reading of literature. Not to mention the beauty that got away, the elusive reaching for impossible perfection that many writers feel.

There is a lot of ranting here about how it is impossible to translate culturally bound purple prose, be it Antonia Byatt or Juan Marsé, even if literary translators are a load of writers *manqués* who are not up to the task anyway. But it's coming, you saw it coming, the lie about English being the richest, biggest language, not a queen or king-size bed of language for the writer to writhe on, but a lexical lay of imperial proportions – 500,000

words, with German coming in at a poor 185,000, French, at a puny 100,000 and Spanish at a plucky 250,000. Pity poor Catalan, not even in the frame... Evidence, back to dictionaries, the OED, naturally. As if there were a dictionary that could accommodate all past Spanish and Spanish as it has spread and continues to spread across the Peninsula and the Americas, the thousands of local slangs generating new words by the minute... all potential for writers.

To cap it all, these words are locked into whole structures of language, almost hermetically sealed against each other, that get in the way of translation and here King returns to Proust and, in his view, the mistranslations of his famous opening sentence. I am reminded of a conversation I once had with a Chinese translator translating Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* and the specific issue of translating the word *Dasein*. It was quite clear that this philosopher-translator had 'understood' Heidegger's ideas and language - though you couldn't find languages more far apart than those set in the philosophical traditions of China and Germany, and that he could discuss these in relaxed fashion in a seminar on the translation of philosophy, in English, to boot. He explained how the translation of Marxist thought had eased his path and then how he had had to create Chinese characters in order to translate key concepts in Heidegger, essentially how Chinese, like all languages, is enriched and developed by translation.

Finally, though Jeff King concludes that he reads for purely 'aesthetic' reasons, his is a variation on the hackneyed defence of the idea that literature in English has so much to offer that you can get by without reading other literatures, shades of the Amises. True, he adds in Spanish, the only other language he reads, but it comes in a poor second. Too bad, he doesn't read Catalan or Russian or French or German or... and that his blinkered vision of the process of literary translation precludes him from taking such a route. He could be into W.G. Sebald in Anthea Bell's wonderful translations or Platonov in Robert Chandler's and other great authors out there in fine translations by real professionals. I suspect that he is really a translator *manqué* and that's the source of his venom. He follows another of his grand assertions about Spanish writers and film-makers being 'obsessed with works about rites of passage' (!) with the confession that 'as much as I have tried, I have always failed to translate rites of passage in a pithy way.' What a pity! As he is so well aware, knowledge of two languages doesn't make one a literary translator, even if you are a writer.