

## **RIDING THE CURRENTS: WHY I CANNOT NOT TRANSLATE**

In the two dimensions of my everyday world—the internal and the external—there are always two languages flowing in and out of each other—Greek and English. I have lived in Greece for 35 years, and have been fluent in Modern Greek for 25 of those years. Though my first language is English, I have worked and loved and drifted along in solitude immersed in both languages. With some of my friends and associates, I speak only English, with others, Greek, and with a few we shift back and forth—sometimes in mid-sentence—depending on our mood and the topic of conversation.

When I think or daydream or fantasize, both languages run through my head, like two constantly flowing currents, one rushing forward at times while the other recedes, then vice versa. I have had three long-term love relationships during my years in Greece, the first entirely in English, the second two entirely in Greek. I have taught and served as an administrator at four educational institutions in Greece, one a private American high school, two private American colleges and one a state university. In all of those I used mostly English, though with some colleagues I spoke primarily Greek.

What does this fluid interchange between Greek and English have to do with literary translation? At the very least it makes the rendering of Greek poems into English a natural extension of an act I engage in continuously, day in and

day out. The "literary" aspect is special, but the "translation" aspect is just part of the never-ending rush of two languages I'm constantly awash in.

One of the things that fascinates me about living in this bilingual environment is that, while I dream and think and fantasize in both languages, in certain contexts Greek dominates—especially in the realm of the emotions and relationships. Greek has a rich vocabulary connected to apprehending and expressing emotions. So much so that when I get emotional (no matter what I'm feeling) Greek words and phrases associated with that emotion pop into my head, even when my interlocutor and I are speaking in English. And in other contexts, such as academics and teaching, I tend to function primarily in English. I can be speaking Greek to students or colleagues and still I'm thinking in English. Writing poetry too has become a two-language pursuit, even though I almost always compose in English. The associations I make in my head, the memories I reflect on, the conversations and other experiences I often recollect when writing poems, are usually the stuff of both languages. In short, translation and thinking have become one in the same, no matter which of the two languages I'm consciously using.

Even before I came to Greece, translation had me in its sway. As a literature and creative writing student in America in the 1970s, I cut my teeth, as it were, on translation. I knew the modern and contemporary poets rendered into English by Bly and Merwin, Arrowsmith and Keeley, Friebert and Strand, and many others, better than I knew the works of poets in my own tradition. My early poems were informed as much by Andrade, Pavezze, Transtromer,

Akhmatova, Rilke, Neruda and Cavafy as they were by modern and contemporary Anglophone poets. Rightly or wrongly, very early on I stopped thinking about whether the text I was reading was or was not originally written in English. What mattered was the quality of what was being conveyed, how much and in what ways the words moved me. So, long before I ever immersed myself in Greece and Greek, the barriers between languages had already started eroding.

As a direct result of my immersion into translation, I came across modern Greek poetry—and was immediately swept away. After visiting Greece as a tourist in 1976, the desire to get to know the language and culture of Seferis, Elytis, Sikelianos, Ritsos and Cavafy became one of the motivating forces that pushed me to emigrate from America in 1980. After a few years in my adopted homeland, moving back and forth from English to Greek on an everyday basis and alternating from my own writing to rendering Greek poets into English became part and parcel of a larger phenomenon—my relationship with language. To my endless joy—and frequent consternation—living in a foreign country has always been as much about language as it's been about whatever activity I'm engaged in, whether writing or teaching, making love or filling my car with gas. Even in my dream world Greek and English intermingle. Translation is, for me, an ongoing, 24/7 activity.

As I continued to write and translate, the two processes, over the years, began to converge, or at least that's the way it felt. Let me explain. I am what is called a process writer. My poems come out of a certain writing process

that starts with free writing. When I free write I don't care about meaning. I simply write what comes, following an essential point I learned from one of my teachers, Richard Hugo, who taught that poets carry with them one of two assumptions: either music follows meaning, or meaning follows music. For Hugo, poets are far better off if they assume the latter. Meaning will come through, no matter what. He taught that what is really important in a poem is the music it conveys. He would paraphrase Wallace Stevens in saying that meaning in a poem is what keeps the reader's mind busy while the rest of the poem—and by that he mostly meant rhythm and sound—goes about its work.

So I start my poems by free writing, following in each line a specific rhythm and vowel/consonant sound, not worrying at all about making sense. After I generate several pages, usually around six, I start cutting the pages down, still following music, keeping (and sometimes adding to) whatever lines or phrases seem interesting (for any number of reasons). Once I pare the material down to a block of raw material that can't be cut down any more (usually about a page or so), then I shift my focus from music to meaning—identifying imagery, themes, tones, contexts, etc. and assembling these lines together in clusters, always looking for correspondences that might give the material shape and substance. In this latter stage I work intently at forming a coherent, expressive poem, keeping in mind as I continue to pare down that I might wind up with only one or two good lines to be used in a later free write.

What fascinates me about translation is that, once I have the literal, which

often has several options identified for numerous specific words and phrases in the original, it begins to feel like one of my own poems in that latter stage I describe above. Once I have left the original language behind ("Get away from the original as soon as possible," a well known translator once advised me), as with my own poems, I work and rework the material until I manage to shape it into a coherent piece of expressive writing. In that sense, at least in its latter stage, my own writing process and the translation process echo each other.

Of course, while working on a translation, I care about being true to the original, just as I care about making a poem that works well in the target language, while acknowledging that something is lost—and often something gained—in trying to be true to both poles of that effort. Perhaps more than other translators, because of my reliance on music in shaping my own poems, I will frequently let rhythm and sound, the feel of a line and tone influence my choices as I shape a literal into a finished poem in English.

My essential point here is that translating poetry is, for me, not simply a literary act I engage in intermittently. Living in a foreign country, speaking both the local language and my native tongue, I cannot NOT translate. My life awake and asleep; the emotional, professional, social and personal dimensions of that life—all involve moving back and forth from Greek to English, and continuously translating the one to the other along the way. In the realm of my reading and writing life, I came of age as a writer, thinker and perceiver of the world to a great extent through translations. I choose to live

in a country far away from my native land and mother tongue, in part because those early reading experiences enabled me to have faith in the translation process. Having faith in the power of translation meant that there would always be poetry in my life, and, equally important, that I would not "lose" my native language even though I was living far away from its sources. Even my own writing process—the way I write a poem and how I re-immense myself into experiences that involve Greek and the Greek world—intimately involves translation, making the writing of poetry in my mother tongue a two-language pursuit. I take immense pleasure in the fact that writing and translating poetry are part of a larger, extremely fluid bilingual interchange that is constantly at work in both my inner and outer worlds. One of the joys in my life is that I am always—waking or sleeping, working or playing, writing or just mulling things over—riding the currents of two languages.

Don Schofield  
Paper Presentation  
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Humanities Department  
University of La Verne, Athens, Greece  
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