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At Language's Edge

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Panel: At language's edge. The author discusses what it means to have their work translated into other languages.

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At Language's Edge

By Teemu Manninen (Finland)

I was six years old, walking across a park towards my father's photography studio when I suddenly had a revelation about the English language. I remember mulling over a sentence in Finnish and English. I understood, there and then, how their structures differ: if one goes this way, the other goes that way.

The threads of syntax unthreaded and rethreaded themselves in my head. The knot of grammar unspooled, loosened, then wove itself back together again in another knot that was similar but different.

My brain had grown a new hemisphere. I saw things in two. The threaded patterns of tongues transposed on top of each other, within each other, as themselves and as another. Translation: double vision.

Ever since then, I have both dreamed and thought in two languages. I can't explain why. It happened, I lived with it.

When I was 16, I started to write poetry in English. Again, a new kind of experience of language overtook me. Writing in Finnish, I never have the feeling of "inspiration", in the sense of the original Latin: *inspirare*, to breathe in, to inhale.

I inhale English verse. It comes to me, without bidding, inhabits the lungs of my brain. In Finnish, I have to plan meticulously to bypass mannerisms, to avoid the traps of convention. In English I can write almost unconsciously, and structures of rhetoric bloom up around an idea, all on their own.

This is why, when I translate my poetry into English, the translations are never faithful. They are an exploration of my other self, the one I could have been, or am, when I am English.

These translations come very easily to me. Sometimes I even have a sense of my poetry being written for translation, or, written in a dialect of English called Finnish. Because of this, once translated, my poems feel alien, almost as if I had not written them myself.

And yet, I have never tried actively to seek publication in English. When I became a published poet, ten years ago, I stopped writing in English, almost stopped translating my poetry too.

Why? Because language is social in nature. It is grounded in daily life, in a culture that is formed by us, in us, around us, every time we perform its institutions, its rituals and habits, its ways and means.

I have no sense of a cultural audience in English. A working writer needs that, a sense of cultural tradition that constructs you, instructs you and surrounds you with the knowledge of how forms, taste, poetics and politics work in your language environment; how these things come to be because of given material, historical and social conditions.

Now, I know my Finnish audience. I know what and who they are, what they do and why. With English, I feel a void inside me, a clamoring emptiness. I throw my words into this void and they do not echo.

But, coming here, I have been thinking hard about this question of cultural resonance, and particularly in the context of world literature, of translated literature.

What is the task of translation? If local literatures, local languages, only resonate within their own sounding-chambers, can there ever be a real dialogue, a real sharing of experience between nations and peoples?

Is experience to be shared, even, or will it always be domesticated? Can languages resonate with each other, or should they stay alien and other, in order to sound out the actual distances between us?

I wonder about the global marketplace of literature. I wonder what kind of space it is: is it a showroom for exotic aliens, or a drum circle where different instruments find their place in the overall rhythms, weaving in and out of harmonies that complement and contrast each other?

I wonder about that space that is neither local nor global, a place where traditions mix and languages meet under the auspices of translation, of double vision, like the parliament of birds in that old Persian tale that go looking for their god, the great Simorgh, only to find, in the end, their own flock looking back at them from the mirror: that the thing you look up to is only ever this eclectic collection of threads, a knot of particularities, a fiction.

Fiction, from Latin *fingere* , means a shaping, a molding. I know the knots of language can be loosened, but can they ever be re-tied? Can a fictional identity become real? Could I exist, at once, in two languages, within one as an actual, historic individual, and in the other as a deliberately shaped fiction, an in-spiration produced by a networked space of ahistorical, atemporal connectivities?

I don't know. But I am throwing my words into the echo-chamber again. I am waiting for a reply.