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Yet Another Example of the Non-Porousness of Certain Borders

Yorgos Trillidis

Panel: Writing in Translation / Writing Across Languages

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Yet Another Example of the Non-Porousness of Certain Borders

Yorgos Trillidis

1. Delusions of Adequacy

A few years ago I applied to a British post-graduate program in Creative Writing. After I had made the short-list, I was asked to attend an interview. Their first question was, ‘How do you think this program will benefit you?’ I believe basic civility, common to situations of the sort, coupled with the notorious English notion of good-manners, hindered my interviewers from speaking their minds. It seemed to me that what they actually wanted to ask, and rightfully so, was: ‘How do you, a non-native speaker, think you can write in English?’ Instinctively, I addressed the implied question. ‘Legend has it,’ I reluctantly uttered, ‘that when Joseph Conrad set foot on the British Isles he spoke no more than six words of English. I speak twice as many.’ Fortunately, they smiled. I got accepted.

Unfortunately, it soon emerged that I wasn’t Joseph Conrad. Struggling as I did for days on end to construct comprehensible sentences for class (that was as high as the bar could go; forget alluring or breathtaking, an intelligible line would launch me into an ecstatic orbit around my ego), squeezing my limited vocabulary to get a word, any word, that would at least help me convey the most basic idea of what I was trying to say (the Flaubertian ‘*mot juste*? I wouldn’t know ‘*le mot juste*’ if it bit me in *le derriere*), tormenting my fellow-students with page after page of unreadable material (‘the horror... the horror...’ was the typical reaction whenever my turn came to get workshopped), kidding myself that, at the end of the day, it all came down to what you say not how you say it, I hardly realized that my time was up and the program was coming to an end. My dissertation consisted of a chunky piece from my novel-in-progress. Thanks to the, ever-present but so rarely demonstrated, British sympathy, I passed. Needless to say, the novel-in-progress was never touched again.

2. Not I

In hindsight, I think I understand why it all went wrong. Instead of fighting the good fight with what I had, I fantasized of possessing a nuclear armament. Whereas I should have stuck up for the English I knew (after all, I had been admitted to a relatively competitive program on the strength of a work sample written in the most simple if not telegraphic, English), I tried to transplant my loaded, baroque, meandering Greek style into British soil. The result: what seemed rich in Greek it felt outright wordy in English; what was designed to pass as insightful read simply pretentious in the Latin alphabet; light touch was received as frivolous; the poignant parts turned out plainly corny, the humorous parts just laughable. Unsurprisingly, the transplant never flowered. I had underestimated

the words' fine nuances. I was unaware of the language's subtle mechanics. At my most optimistic, I was naïve enough to believe that those shortcomings could somehow turn into my favor. They never did.

But I've learned my lesson. Nowadays, I rarely engage in such onerous tasks. My writing in English is a product of necessity rather than the outcome of pleasurable pastime. I try to keep things simple now. For someone irresistibly attracted to verbosity, this is not easy. It feels as if you're forced to use only half your brain, like playing away games all season (in Old Trafford, say, or Santiago Bernabeu where a modest defeat is the ultimate triumph). When I confronted my publisher with a short story I had written in English, he was amused. 'What? You write it with your left hand?' My publisher is, like all publishers, an individual prone to hyperbole, but that time he was spot on. In English, my style is different, the tone is different, the voice is different; everything is simpler and terse, the relationship between the writer and the reader is founded on a need-to-know basis. It's not really me writing those words; it's my second-language-speaking stand-in.

3. There's an upside, there has to be an upside

Nabokov wrote English prose of the highest caliber, still he maintained that his private tragedy was that he had to abandon the 'untrammelled, rich and infinite docile' Russian tongue for a 'second-rate' brand of English. Accusations of false modesty can be brought only by the strictly monolingual. On the other hand, it has been argued that Beckett's resort to French liberated him from the Joycean ghost haunting him. Judging from 'Dream of fair to middling women', this seems like a valid argument. Milan Kundera readily switched languages when left Prague for Paris. On the other hand, Max Sebald, despite his fluency and the fact he had lived in East Anglia for twenty five years, never attempted an English novel. So where does that leave us? In my case I think I might have traced one advantage. When writing in English, I can tell from the very beginning if there's a story worth telling. I cannot flood the page with linguistic pyrotechnics, nor can I beat around the bush. I must either go full frontal or run backstage.

Ah, one also realizes that Narcissus's river has gone dry. There's this well-known bit of guidance for writers: 'Kill your darlings'; i.e., if you've scribbled down a bit you like more than others, it is probably to the detriment of your piece and you'd better drop it. I am immune, by default, to this sound advice. When it comes to English, I type with egalitarian fingertips. I have no darlings. Everything seems equally good or, same thing, equally bad. I can make no real choices. If I do they

will be, more or less, arbitrary ones, which coming full circle, makes them not real choices. The Iowa City Public Library and the International Writing Program Panel Series-September 26, 2008: Georgios Trillidis (Cyprus), Kristof Magnusson (Germany/Iceland), Maryam Ala Amjadi (Iran), Yael Globerman (Israel), Carlos Gamerro (Argentina). For electronic text, please visit iwip.uiowa.edu

ability to discern between good and less good, bad and less bad is forever gone. So I can boast: there's no blood on my hands when I write in English. Now, I know that's not much of an achievement, but then again, it is one I would have never achieved in Greek.