Translation Excellence: Assessment Achievement Maintenance

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Anthony Kerrigan:  
The Attainment of Excellence in Translation  
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Borges, Neruda, Unamuno, Baroja, Ortega. Through the translations of Anthony Kerrigan, winner of the National Book Award in 1975, the reader of English is immediately in excellent company, the best pages of Hispanic literary giants in this century. Kerrigan's career as a translator has been more than an exemplary pursuit of excellence: he has attained it, and he is recognized for having done so. Although there are certain intangibles regarding Kerrigan's sustained achievement—the innate, the God-given, the mysterious—, there are, on the other hand, elements for success which he himself identifies.

For Kerrigan, excellence in translation is first and foremost “a question of Literature. Part of the work of a translator is in selecting good books. His first job is to find a good book to translate. You must select great literature in the other language. It begins with choosing the writer.” The text in the source language must be deserving of the translator's faith. Kerrigan's weaker translations (as he sees it) have been those where the original has not merited his faithfulness: “There's no use in being faithful to something you have no faith in, nor should have any faith in.” He acknowledges that “what I think I've done badly is not good stuff in the original. Bad originals don't lead to good translations.” Kerrigan cannot conceive of how “you can be a great translator of a dumb book.” He recalls when he was on the jury for the National Book Award: “We had a hundred books to choose from, and I simply couldn't separate content to the point where I could say, 'This translator has done such a wonderful job, the only trouble is that he's done a grand job on a dumb book'.” In the final instance, “Great translators have to try their hand and show their ability with important books, those that belong to the permanent repertory of world literature.” And
it would appear that translators have generally exercised good judgment in this regard: “Most translators are not creating garbage because they’re translating things that are good. It’s funny how, in a certain sense, translated literature is a better literature because it’s the best from many countries.”

To achieve excellence in translation, one must be able “to write good English naturally. A translator is a man who can write in his own language. He should be basically a writer.” This means that “a great knowledge of your own language” is required. Mastery of the target language supersedes “knowledge of the other language, which is really secondary.” For Kerrigan, this knowledge encompasses “the richness of English, the English tradition, the English language coming down from the Elizabethans, or even if you want, to go back to Chaucer.” He is interested here in “the whole history of the English language and of people reading in the English language, the tradition which is bigger than any of us.” He operates completely within the realm of linguistic and literary legacy: “I’m trying to represent the best possible for the English language. What I’m trying to do is to carry on the tradition of the language of Shakespeare.” The translator striving for excellence is obliged to be well versed in what his own language has accomplished for generations of readers.

Once a worthy choice of author and text has been made, and the translator acknowledges that he will be striving to match the best offered by the English tradition (in an attempt to contribute to it), excellence is pursued by “measuring and pondering every word” in praxis. Kerrigan has been widely acclaimed for his success in this endeavor: “A lot of people have said good things about me there, people like Dahlberg pointing out that I never used anything but the best language at all times, the richest possible selection of words. I’ve never fallen into cheapness, into effects.” For him, hypothetically, “the reading public is not debased, it is enlightened, and they want the very best in the language they’re reading. If they can’t read in Spanish, then they’re reading my English, and therefore I give them the best possible English.” An ideal readership appears to contribute to the translator's effort: high standards by the reading public demand to be met, and the translator must work toward this satisfaction (although, in the end, the ideal reader may be no more than a projection of the translator’s own high standards and literary conscientiousness). To achieve this
gratification of the reader, the translator relies heavily, necessarily, on "all kinds of reference books" and "many dictionaries." Not only must equivalences be matched from language to language, but this should be undertaken with an etymological awareness: "If you know a word has a certain etymological meaning, then you can use that word with much more discretion, intelligence, and appropriateness. Some words you have no right to use apart from their etymology. If you reduce a word to its etymology, you can never be wrong." Again, the tradition of language is brought to bear on the translator with a certain sense of obligation, duty, integrity. An appreciation of etymology leads Kerrigan to feel that: "If I can use a word correctly, with rich root meanings and so on, then it's like a little magic counter, like a keystone arch in a building."

Kerrigan also agrees that it would behoove translators to be familiar with yet another aspect of literary tradition: that of the genre or discourse in which they are working, particularly so for poetry and philosophy. That he is a poet in his own right has helped him in his translation of poetry. At the very least, a translator endowed with poetic sensibility would be far better equipped to achieve a successful translation of poetry. It is like a musician interpreting a great composer: one needs a good ear and a fine sense of melody and rhythm. For a good translation of philosophy, "You should know how to paraphrase German philosophy when it appears in another guise, such as in Spanish." Knowledge of the philosophical tradition—of its discourse—is a prerequisite in this instance. The novel, on the other hand, Kerrigan views as "an open form, all-encompassing, it's all of life. I think anybody with a general sensibility could translate a novel."

Nor is Kerrigan at all convinced that knowing the author (the possibility of the consultative venture) will help to yield a better translation. He feels that it probably should, but that this is never a given. First of all, "To ask a poet, 'What do you mean here in this line?' is not a good question. A poet is no longer the owner of that line of verse, it belongs to the reader then, and to the world." Further, there are always cases of linguistic and semantic opacity where the source language may be beyond the equivalent reach of the target language. In translating El Central by Cuban poet Reinaldo Arenas, Kerrigan says that he "started to consult Arenas," but the effort was futile: "I asked him about Cuban words mainly based on sugar mill operations."
But you find that there is no equivalent in English. How are you going to talk about a certain implement in a sugar mill when there is no American or English word for it, where there are no sugar mills of that type any place but Cuba?" The answer lies in improvisation and paraphrase, the translator extemporizing creatively on his faithfulness to the original. For this to succeed, knowledge again is the key: "You have got to know how it works, and be approximate in your description of that implement."

With this it is evident that literalness in translation is a relative objective for Kerrigan: "I can't see any real reason to be 'al pie de la letra', verbatim, with things." Poetry especially can be jeopardized by a literal approach. With poetry "a good translator is really a writer," another poet working in English. And if the translator "thinks of himself as simply trying to get a literal exactness, he's going to give a kind of truncated version. How are you going to translate literally, word for word, a poem? Then you destroy it utterly." The translator must resort to creative paraphrase when dealing with poetry, "which is the only thing you can do" if it is to be successful. Yet in translating Borges and Unamuno, Kerrigan strove for literalness. He felt that with Borges there was "no particular reason to improvise or change" because of his natural and transparent style: "With him almost everything comes through just as he wrote it." Unamuno required a literal approach for a different reason: "It was a thought process, and you can't fool around with sequence if you're tracing thought. You have to get it pretty exact, and you can't paraphrase it too well." Each author and text will call for a different level of translation adherence to the original, and the genres and discourses themselves will dictate the degree of literal variation.

Translation workshops and theory can contribute to excellence in an indirect manner. Since the literary translator is, in the final analysis, a writer also, Kerrigan does not conceive "how you can train a man to be a professional translator any more than in creative writing courses you can train anybody to write who isn't scheduled by destiny to write." But workshops can help to make "a lot of people more literate and increase their sensibilities." Their value lies in the fact that they are "a good intellectual stimulus," though not necessarily to write. The participant in a workshop is learning more about his own language and "what you can use in order to bring over from the other language something into English." And the student of translation does practice
his writing in the workshop. But of greater importance for Kerrigan is the training one receives in reading: "They will be readers, and readers are just as important. Poetry Magazine had a quote from Whitman: 'To have great poets, you must have great audiences'. So I think you're teaching people to read better and to read with some critical faculty." The workshop makes its greatest contribution in the sense that it will raise the level of appreciation and expectancy of readers, thus enriching the tradition of excellence in English literature by enhancing the public demand for superior quality of language in print. The original author and the translator represent a push in this direction, but the reader should constitute a challenging pull to complement their effort. Theory in the workshop functions largely in the same manner: it heightens awareness and appreciation—linguistic, semantic, and philosophical—of various aspects of translation. But neither the workshop nor the theory a translator make. They can help to hone the skills of a practitioner, but they are no substitute for practice itself or for talent—inate, God-given, mysterious—whereby one is "scheduled by destiny to write." The ability to excel in translation transcends simple know-how, and, like all gifts, it requires constant, hard work for its realization.

The attainment of excellence in tradition is aided by "publishers of good will: men of good faith who are actually interested in writers and translators, and who try to be fair." Such publishers appreciate great literature and the desire to bring it into English. They will negotiate fair contracts with the translator, and the element of trust figures prominently: "If you have a good man, and you know he's doing good work and he means well by the project, then leave him alone." Kerrigan takes into account that "the essence of being anything in writing, whether you're a translator or a creative writer, is that you really are isolated, just you and your typewriter." He is concerned about "bringing in too many people on a project," where "every translator is going to translate differently, and if you ask another translator to check on a first translator's approach and the results of his work, then the second translator is going to find everything wrong because that's not the way he would have done it."

Thus the quality of a translation is best judged by "a reader of books," not another translator: "It's bad in general to ask another translator to review a translator's work. That's a blunder because the other translator is going to find it bad. If you want a bad report, you give it to another translator to look at." The translator himself, Kerrigan
Anthony Kerrigan says, also participates with validity in judging the quality of his own work: "one has a conscience as a person and as a worker in words, a literary worker, and you have to have developed a sixth sense regarding excellence. You have to judge yourself by high standards, and it has to do with how you've judged the author's original." This sixth sense evolves from recognition and appreciation, which are then transformed into emulation:

If it's something wonderfully written, and you have a feel for it, and you know what it can do, you keep as high a level as you possibly can in English. You don't use cheap words, especially if the author hasn't. You keep the language in the context in which it's given in the original. Then in translating you're faithful to his text, but you're also faithful to the language you're writing in, to your own language. You have a feeling for what the original author achieved, and you want to match that in English. Whether or not felicitous emulation of the original has been achieved then falls to the verdict of an impartial, knowledgeable, and demanding reader of Literature.

Ultimately, Anthony Kerrigan strives for "not only clarity in the English language, but a certain elegance." In translating he attempts to provide "the overall picture of the man, the overall tone, as it were, and the style." His goal is to use "the best possible English to match the best possible language of the original." In doing so, he views himself as "a literary executor of the estate of the writer. I'm trying to achieve in English what the author wanted to do." Clear, elegant, and faithful ("You never want to traduce a man who has written A and call it B"), knowledgeable, flexible, and dedicated, Kerrigan works toward an "English as naked as it is glorious, and the more naked it is, the more glorious." As he concludes: "There's only so much time in the world and so much print that people can read, we might as well be reading the best possible."
NOTES

1. Kerrigan received the National Book Award for the “most distinguished book of translation,” The Agony of Christianity (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1974). He has also translated works by Angel González, Francisco Brines, José Manuel Caballero Bonald, Antonio Colinas, Jaime Gil de Biedma, José Emilio Pacheco, and H. Padilla, among others. He is currently working on a new translation of Fernando Arrabal’s award-winning novel (Premio Eugenio Nadal, 1982) La torre herida por el rayo, together with ongoing projects such as Ortega and Borges.

2. In June of 1975 Michael Smith, writing for The Irish Times (Dublin), called Kerrigan “a translator of genius (...)perhaps the greatest translator of Spanish into English.”

3. The content of what follows is drawn from interviews and conversations I have had with Kerrigan over the past three years.

4. The outcome of that National Book Award was that it was given to “two women whom I had never heard of and haven’t heard of since, but they did a fantastically important book, and they put it into certainly acceptable English. I don’t know whether that was the best translation of the year or not, but it was the best book, and by force of insistence I got the prize that year for (...) the complete volumes of Mandelstam.”

5. In this regard, Kerrigan adds the following: “Junk may sell where it’s spouted out, but it doesn’t get into world translation. Of course, there are exceptions. Stalin’s mouthings and ridiculous nonsense must be in fifty or a hundred languages. But of course, those were paid translators, state translators, or crazy people from other countries who will translate nonsense no matter what it is. But that’s not literature, it’s propaganda for political purposes.”

6. Kerrigan laments the fact that for him “there’s no Spanish to English dictionary that’s really first-rate, like Harrap’s in French-English.”

7. El Central (New York: Avon Books, 1984). Kerrigan says of this translation that it was a prose epic “I simply re-wrote. This is the first time I’ve ever done this. Now, Arenas knows this, and he’s said, ‘My God, it’s better!’ Well, of course, it isn’t, but it’s what I did. And not only is the agent delighted, and Arenas the author delighted, but the publisher who had rejected the Spanish took the English. It’s not that I’ve made a good book out of a bad one, it’s not that at all. The point is it’s worked, and with the author’s permission.”

8. The translator’s contract which he would like to see widely accepted is that which has been drawn up by the American Literary Translator’s Association.