

ON SELF-TRANSLATION

“It’s like opening one’s mouth and hearing someone else’s voice emerge.”

—Iris Murdoch

In 2001 I published *On Borrowed Words: A Memoir of Language*, in which I reflected on the lives I had lived in Yiddish, Spanish, Hebrew, and English. In the years since, I have often reflected on those reflections, as well as on various facets of my experience that I couldn’t fully address in the book. I want to concentrate here on one of those facets—namely, on self-translation. But I will have to begin more generally, by exploring the link between language and epistemology.

I firmly believe that how one perceives the world in any given moment depends on the language in which that moment is experienced. Take Yiddish, which is, at its root, a Germanic language, but is strongly influenced by Hebrew. It also features Slavic inclusions. These distinct elements give the language a taste, an idiosyncrasy. The life I lived in Yiddish was defined by the rhyme, the cadence of the sentences I used to process and describe it. But this wasn’t my only life. I was born in 1961 in Mexico City into an immigrant enclave of Eastern European Jews, and so began speaking Spanish right alongside Yiddish. I have two mother tongues—*di mame loshn* and *la lengua maternal*. Both shape my viewpoint. Eating in Spanish—dreaming, loving, and deriving meaning from life in that language—all these actions differ from their counterparts in Yiddish. The taste of things is determined by the words used to express it.

It wasn’t until I left Mexico—that is, left Spanish and Yiddish—and switched first to Hebrew while living in Israel in 1979, then to English after immigrating to New York City in the mid-eighties, that I was inspired

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to write a linguistic autobiography. I had read a number of memoirs in the same vein. Among the accounts that influenced me most were Eva Hoffman's *Lost in Translation*, Joseph Conrad's *A Personal Record*, Vladimir Nabokov's *Speak, Memory*, Andre Aciman's *Out of Egypt*, Edward Said's *Out of Place*, Ariel Dorfman's *Heading South, Looking North*, and Jorge Luis Borges's "An Autobiographical Essay," cowritten with Norman Thomas di Giovanni and first published in the *New Yorker*.

While I frequently saw myself mirrored in these authors' odysseys, I felt that, in some cases, they didn't quite do justice to the polyglot's sense of having multiple dimensions, each manifesting itself in a different tongue. For me, this experience could even be seen as a splitting of selves. I empathized with the protagonist, or protagonists, of Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Doctor Jekyll and Mister Hyde*. This Victorian parable inspired me to conceive of my linguistic division as a deeper psychological rift. Each language symbolized another sphere: in Yiddish and Spanish I felt I was closer to a raw, primal aspect of my being, whereas in English, which to me is more methodical, I could act like a cosmopolite. These, of course, are just fictions of the mind. Still, a polyglot switching languages does more than simply substitute one code for another. The shift is also physical. Whenever I use Spanish, for instance, I am aware of a freer, more agile movement of my arms, and even of a different grammar in terms of facial expressions. English forces me to be more rigid, maybe even uptight. Yiddish, I feel, is the best, most humorous tongue to swear in. And Hebrew is more liturgical as well as theological; to me, it is the language of the divine and of the afterlife.

In conceiving *On Borrowed Words*, one of my original intentions was to write each of its lengthy chapters in the tongue in which I experienced the relevant phase of my life, but that plan was obviously impractical. Truth is, I was suffering from writer's block, a malady that rarely affects me. Meditating on the past is one thing, but turning those musings into a readable story is another. Tired of waiting, my editor at Viking, Don Fehr, decided to pay me a visit. After lunch, we took a long, contemplative walk on a nearby bicycle path. At one point, after finally confessing my anxiety, my inability to "open the faucet," a metaphor I liked using at the time, Fehr came up with an intriguing idea: he suggested I write—or, at least, attempt to write—my memoir as if I were still living through it. That is, that I look at my past as a continuous present.

It was an exciting proposal, but I wanted to take it even further. I wanted to explain the depth of what "the present" meant in its own terms.

It was then that I told Fehr my thought of drafting each of the chapters not only in the present but also in the tongue in which it had been lived. He laughed and reminded me that I had signed up to write a memoir in English.

“What if I write the chapters in their respective languages and then translate them into English?” I asked. That drew a smile. We discussed the difference between reading a book in the original and reading it in translation. I related two metaphors for translation that I like enormously: in *Don Quixote*, Cervantes writes that reading a book in translation is like looking at a Flemish tapestry from the back; and the Hebrew poet Chaim Nahman Bialik once said that translation is like kissing a bride through a veil. “As long as the quality of the prose is as solid as it is likely to be in the chapter written in English, I’m game . . .”

He was—but I wasn’t. My approach was shrewd yet cumbersome. It would entail becoming a different writer in each section. I had been active as a writer in every linguistic period of my life: I wrote plays and stories in Yiddish, and letters and essays in Hebrew; in Manhattan, I regularly filed newspaper columns and reviews in Spanish to newspapers in Mexico, Argentina, Colombia, and Spain; and now I was married and had a child and wrote for the *New York Times* in English. Now I would have to become a native or a near-native speaker in all these tongues at the same time. To become such a speaker, it isn’t enough to learn a language; one must internalize it, make it fully one’s own. We internalize a language when we organize the world around us based on its parameters. It isn’t that we know words to describe things, but that things come to us through their respective words. This is only achieved through time, by letting oneself be absorbed (and, maybe, *absolved*) by a language’s metabolism.

A polyglot may be proficient in several languages at once or may be more active and engaged in some and less so in others. Some languages are more deeply ingrained in one’s soul. I was able to switch from Spanish to English and back with ease. If prompted, I could switch to Yiddish, but I felt rusty, even inept, as if I had abandoned a lover years ago and now suddenly wanted to return to her embrace. She knew well I no longer cared for her as I once had. She knew also that other lovers had come along. The same with Hebrew. In fact, a few years later I would write a book precisely on this topic, *Resurrecting Hebrew* (2008). It had two parallel narratives: one concerned my attempt to regain my footing in the sacred tongue after years of neglect, and the other concerned Eliezer ben Yehuda, the great linguistic renovator who had made the biblical tongue modern as part of the Zionist project.

Similarly, each of the chapters of *On Borrowed Words* is devoted to a significant person in my life: my paternal grandmother, *Bobe Bela*; my father, Abraham Stavans, a Mexican actor; my brother, Darian, a musician; and, finally, me. These chapters are anchored by an object connected to the person at their center: a pistol, a set of keys, an old photograph . . . Each chapter starts in the present, as the object, to which I refer in detail, prompts a flashback. Each chapter navigates from past to present and back, giving the impression that each story is still unfolding, that one's reminiscences help one understand what is taking place today, right now.

If I were going to write the book in languages other than English, there was never any doubt in my mind that I, and nobody else, would also do the translation. The translator would become the protagonist of the book, not only in terms of content, but also in terms of form. In the end, I decided to write the entire autobiography *in translation without an original*, that is, to give my English a variety of accents. And so, for example, I wrote about the *Yidische Schule in Mexike* where I studied as a child in English, but used a Yiddish cadence, a rhythm that makes it appear, to invoke Bialik's metaphor, as if one were accessing that period "through a veil." The same goes for my experiences in Israel, where I worked at a kibbutz. I wanted the reader to get the impression that something was awkward, slightly amiss—that the lens through which my odyssey was seen was somewhat warped.

Over the twelve months I spent writing the book, doubling languages as well as temporalities, I suffered from constant doubts about the accuracy of my recollections and the authenticity of my voice, and I was haunted by lucid, peculiar dreams; seeing my memoir in print gave me a sudden, overwhelming sense of being an impostor, of having usurped someone else's identity. I recall receiving the first copy by mail and thinking, well, this is who I am now. Or better, this is who I have chosen to be. This was the narrative by which others would know me . . . I also remember thinking, my life is certifiably in English now. It was as if there had been a linguistic race inside me, and English had won it. All other languages, all other versions of me would now be appended to it.

Unsurprisingly, when translations of *On Borrowed Words* began to appear, I found them nothing short of bizarre. Spanish was a special case. Lety Barrera, a talented translator and the wife of a friend, titled her rendition of the book *Palabras prestadas: Autobiografía* (2013). As she worked, she periodically sent me sections for review and approval. This was a surprisingly unsettling experience. I saw right away that the work was first-rate, but it didn't feel like my Spanish. At first I was tempted to revise it, to

make it sound like the Spanish-language me. But I knew that would be wrong. This was Barrera's translation, not mine. I didn't want to be an intrusive author.

The publisher had originally asked me to do the Spanish version myself. I declined: it would have taken enormous psychological effort to redress the narrative, which I had fashioned with such care, in another language. It would have essentially meant rewriting the book, and repetition is one of my lifelong phobias. Besides, why redo the autobiography when I could employ my energy in other ventures?

But the very prospect invited me to think about self-translation more thoroughly. What happens when translating one's own work? To what degree is the exercise more than the traditional endeavor of rendering a text in another language? Often enough, a translator approaches the source text as immobile, perhaps even sacred. Of course, every translation is an appropriation that involves changes, but there is often a sense that one must, in one way or another, remain faithful to the original, however flawed it may be. In self-translation, on the other hand, there is an unavoidable temptation—indeed, a compulsion—to rewrite the original, to improve upon the source.

In rare instances, of course, an author may feel compelled to improve the original when working with another translator. Case in point: Norman Thomas di Giovanni, one of Borges's many English translators, met the author of "The Aleph" in Cambridge, Massachusetts, when Borges was already a figure of worldwide renown. Di Giovanni offered to translate the Argentine master's stories and even managed to secure a multibook contract with Doubleday. Then he moved to Buenos Aires to be closer to Borges so that he could seek his help in the translation process. They would meet in Borges's office and go over specific texts. Eventually, as the Doubleday books began to appear, the two men grew closer, and di Giovanni started to exert power over Borges. When a particular section of the translation that departed from the original met with Borges's approval, di Giovanni would urge the author to change the original the next time it was reprinted in Spanish. Thus, the translation became the original. This continued for some time, until Borges phoned di Giovanni and informed him that he no longer wished to collaborate.

Another curious example is that of Isaac Bashevis Singer, who emigrated from Poland to the United States in 1935. All his stories and novels—and he wrote plenty—were written in Yiddish. Yet he himself was often involved in their translation into English. A few of the books were

rendered by his nephew, Joseph Singer. But many others were translated by women such as Dorothea Strauss and Elaine Gottlieb. An infamous womanizer, Bashevis Singer would invite a female companion out for coffee or to his apartment and would propose that she become one of his translators. Sometimes these women were fluent Yiddish speakers; on other occasions, they knew no Yiddish at all. The session would start with him reading the original Yiddish and translating it orally into English while the woman took notes. Once they reached the end of the piece, she would take her notes home and edit them; she would then return to Bashevis Singer's apartment and, between sessions of lovemaking, they would work on an acceptable English version. Bashevis Singer called these English versions "the second (or else, the other) original."

Other authors are less susceptible to pressure. Nabokov, who was unhappy with early translations of his work by other hands, became his own translator. He wrote his autobiography, *Speak, Memory*, in English, translated it into Russian, and then engaged in a "re-Englishing of a Russian re-vision" for the final edition. Sholem Aleichem, author of *Tevye's Daughters*, better known in the English-speaking world as the source of the Broadway musical *Fiddler on the Roof*, first wrote in Hebrew and then turned to Yiddish. He himself translated some of his Hebrew works into Yiddish to make them accessible to an audience of poor, semiliterate Jewish shtetl dwellers.

A writer may be prompted to self-translate for a number of reasons. It might have to do with the reach of his or her different languages. Writing a piece in Hebrew, for instance, automatically frames it within a certain context: political, historical, cultural, and aesthetic. The number of secular readers of Yiddish in the twenty-first century is minuscule. There is a growing audience of Hassidic Jews, but their concerns and mine are quite dissimilar; I am a secular Jew interested in global culture. Writing in Spanish would place me in the tradition of Latin American literature, where I only half-belong; after all, I live in the United States, and I speak, read, and write in English on a daily basis. In short, a language is always more than a code of communication. Languages come packaged with cultural memories and literary traditions. Those of us who have a choice of languages are fortunate, but our situation is complicated. The chief benefit is a sense of freedom, of infinite possibility. The chief drawback is a sense of being up in the air, of belonging nowhere in particular.

I want to talk now about the satisfactions and misgivings of translation and self-translation by discussing my own experience. Over the years

I have produced numerous translations in various genres, including novels (*The Underdogs*) and memoirs (*Lazarillo de Tormes*) from the Spanish, *Don Quixote* into Spanglish), essays (Borges from the Spanish, Cynthia Ozick from the English), poetry (Pablo Neruda from the Spanish, Yehuda Halevi from the Hebrew, Emily Dickinson and Elizabeth Bishop from the English), and stories (Juan Rulfo from the Spanish, Isaac Bashevis Singer from the Yiddish). I have even tried my hand at what is known as reverse translation. Working alone and with colleagues, I made two attempts to bring Ángel-Luis Pujante's 1995 Spanish translation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* back into English; one version employed an Elizabethan style, the other modernized the text.

And, in spite of my reluctance, I have also done an occasional self-translation. One of my stories, "Xerox Man," which was included in *The Disappearance: A Novella and Stories* (2006), was originally commissioned by the BBC in 1998 to be read on air. I was living in London then, and the piece—which is set in Manhattan and concerns an Orthodox Jewish book thief—was composed in English. Then a couple of friends, Edmundo Paz Soldán and Alberto Fuguet, asked to include the story in their anthology *Se habla español*. A translator rendered it into Spanish. I was unhappy with the result—the rhythm felt off—and redid it myself. I hesitated, because earlier in my career I had gone in the other direction, translating of my short stories from Spanish into English, and had found it extraordinarily difficult.

I am talking about a series of stories in *The One-Handed Pianist* (2007)—namely, the title piece, "The Death of Yankos"; "Three Nightmares"; and "A Heaven without Crows." Rendering them into English, I felt the temptation to toy with the language, to add characters, and even to change the endings. In truth, I was engaged in the act—the art—of rewriting. I felt untruthful, and preferred to pass on the job to translators such as Amy Prince, David Unger, Harry Morales, and Dick Gerdes. The only self-translation I kept was "The Death of Yankos," and the Spanish and English versions differ dramatically.

Then there was the bilingual experiment of "*Morirse está en hebreo*," a story that served as the basis for the movie *My Mexican Shiva* (2007). The idea was given to me by the director, Alejandro Springall, who had heard it from a friend: an elderly man plots his own death, then his dysfunctional family comes together for the wake and, without really wanting to, sorts out its conflicts. Springall and I spent a sleepless night talking about the plot from numerous perspectives. I subsequently wrote the story in English. Springall adapted it into a Spanish-language screenplay, which he sent to

me. Reading his draft inspired me to change certain aspects of the piece, again in English. This effort at self-translation didn't just entail navigating between languages, but also moving from one genre to another. Eventually, the story was also included in *The Disappearance*. In 2012 it finally appeared in Spanish in the personal anthology *Lengua Fresca*, rendered by the outstanding Argentine translator Felipe Yiriart.

For me—and, I suspect, for most other authors—what begins as self-translation always ends in a more elaborate rewriting. This brings me back to where I started: the existence, in various languages, of different versions of ourselves.

I find it far easier to work with translators who bring my work into “my” languages, even when I fail to recognize myself fully in the results. I have learned to live with the awkwardness of this situation. It has taught me that I have many selves, and that I negotiate these selves every time I choose to express myself in Spanish, Yiddish, Hebrew, or English. While writing *On Borrowed Words*, I came to believe that I lived in translation without an original. In the past decade and a half, I have come to refine that view: I exist in an echo chamber of self-translated voices, all of them my own.