AESTHETICS OF POETIC TRANSLATION: COMMUNICATION ACROSS CULTURES

In *Bhagvadgita* we have a telling analogue that is apt to illustrate the process of translation as metempsychosis:

Vasansi jirnani yatha vihaya
navani grnhati naroparani
tatha sarirani vihaya jirnani
anyani samyati navani dehi.

Casting off the tattered clothes
Man takes on new garments all,
The soul cased in flesh and blood
Takes new bodies abandoning old.

In this accent on immortality of the soul we would see symbolised how in translation a poem gives up its original linguistic frame and reincarnates into a new one. Goethe likens translation to ‘a veiled beauty’, and describes the translator as ‘a bustling go-between’. But the original poem performs no striptease. It does not readily throw away its outer covering. The veil must be gently lifted and with care. A poem in translation is like a migratory bird flying across lands and oceans, acquiring a foreign habitation but retaining the name. Beyond its verbal horizon it enacts a new poem each time it is translated, yet it ought to remain true to itself.

There are linguistic barriers and cultural frontiers. The universality of poetry transcends them all. How does a poem in translation evoke response? For, as there is colour-blindness, there is also cultural blindness. Poetry in translation leaves, like a Cezan painting, many vast, vacant spaces for our imagination and even intuition to fill up. Again a poem inheres the world of sounds and sights, and has a complex sensuous envelope of images and symbols, rhyme and rhythm cadences and nuances subtle but pervasive tonality and metrical patterns, all that lends it patina and identity so very native that the critics right from Cicero to Steiner have made no secret of the futility of
translation; and yet translations have done more than anything else to build bridges of understanding across linguistic and cultural gulf.

That it is untranslatable is one of the definitions offered of poetry. What remains after the attempt, intact and uncommunicated, is the original poem... A painting divides space between self and the whole; so a poem divides experience between itself and otherness. How can identity be translated into anything but itself?

So does George Steiner caution us against the perils of translation in his preface to *The Penguin Book of Modern Verse Translation*. Shelley voices the same feeling in ‘A Defence of Poetry’: “The plant must again spring from its own seeds, or it will bear no flowers”. Every good poem has a unique identity and it has no equivalent. No other art form is so deeply rooted in its medium and culture. It may be paraphrased without great difficulty; but to lift it out of itself as it were and convey it across verbal and cultural clusters intact is a task of extraordinary skill and creativity. Language of poetry is at its intenseset to the core. Word-for-word translation might at the most ensure horizontal correspondences but not vertical correspondences. After all a poem structuring reality in words lives at once on many planes, horizontal and vertical, cultural and creative, verbal and imaginative. And it has as many levels of meaning as the planes on which it exists and unfolds itself. At which level does the translator catch it? If we have to convey only sense-content, even prose rendering would do. But the generic change would mean negation of the *raison d'être* of a poem. It is for poetry’s sake that we turn to poetry, not for prose. That good prose rendering is preferable to bad verse translation is only a compromise. There are some successful attempts of prose versions like Rieu’s *Odyssey* for instance. It is narrative poetry, and story-telling so central that even prose rendering is satisfying. But it does not negate the essential indispensability of the poetic form which not only organizes and shapes the epic but also defines its nature and meaning. Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren in *Understanding Poetry* affirm;
To create a form is to find a way to contemplate, and perhaps to comprehend, our human urgencies. Form is the recognition of fate made joyful because made comprehensible.

In spite of Matthew Arnold’s approval of prose translation, that a poem in prose version ceases to be a poem is a sad reality. Walt Whitman describes *Leaves of Grass* as only a language experiment, and his poetry often appears to be prose run mad. Yet it is certainly not prose. Prose rendering emphasises the content and largely overlooks the form and structure. What makes a poem poetry is not so much its content as its form. A poem is so organically unified that any dissociation of its form and content would leave it totally fractured. The effort to keep a poem intact beyond its verbal and cultural precincts is formidable, for there is a danger of its withering away in the process of transplantation.

An Indian poem translated into English ought to read like an English poem but must not cease to be Indian poetry. And this takes us to the fundamental fact that insistence on word-for-word translation always leads to a most frustrating self defeating exercise. Even a great poem in mechanical and literal translation reads like a parody or a heartless composition. How to translate the rhythmic metaphor, rhyme and rhythm, cadences and nuances, and above all tonality of poetry from one language into another? Our problem is how to translate ‘best words in best order’ without disturbing the order? This creates the basic problem of transcreative process, for the change of linguistic medium is as sensitive and subtle as fundamental. Rimbaud would explain his “magic sophistries with the hallucination of words”. Words are not hard to translate, but not so their hallucination. In poetry each word is unique, and in each word the universe expands. Even in the original, poetry suffers no synonyms as substitutes. The slightest tinkering might mar its beauty. Words are like the seeds sown in the poet’s consciousness. They cut across the poet’s imagination as they-sprout, and pattern themselves in syntactic structures so
distinctive and the style so personal that even the most competent mechanical translation would be poetically heartless.

A work of art originally exists at an intersection of time and space, and is always addressed to the contemporary audience. When a poem is translated it is released not only from the printed page or from its source language but also from the intersection of time and space of its birth. If one end of it is addressed to the original, its other end is addressed to the audience far away both in time and space. Unless in translation also it acquires a certain measure of timelessness and universality, it might fall flat in fresh fields and pastures new. Like the original poet, the translator too must not overlook his audiences, distant and different culturally, linguistically, and even spatially.

But the original is not like the rock of Caucasus to which the translator like Prometheus is bound. Is translation an art? If yes, like all art it must insist on creativity and autonomy. True, the process of translation is a recreative process and the autonomy of the translator is not boundless like the poet's. Nor should the translator's liberty be allowed to degenerate into a charter of licence. The question is, should translation be as faithful as a photograph or as imaginative as a painting? Nabakov in his preface to the English rendition of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* admits to "have sacrificed to total accuracy and completeness of meaning, every element of form save the iambic rhythm", which runs counter to the poetic process as envisaged by Mallarme: "To paint not the thing, but the effect it produces". The dilemma here is not only of autonomy and bondage, but also of adequacy and excellence, understanding and experience, literality and creativity or re-creativity. The problem of integrity of translation should not submerge the translator's freedom nor mar the splendour of the original by mechanical and heartless rendering. A foreign poem in translation is like an expatriate artist, an innocent abroad. Who in Rome must like a Roman be, but must not lose native identity. That ideal translation must be faithful to the original
and yet not look like a translation is a most intriguing paradox confronting the translator. To call upon the translator to step into the shoes of the original poet is a veritable condition of the pilgrim’s progress not strictly in an interlinear way. The translator must somehow endeavour to move backward to the moment of the poem’s nativity and then simulate the same poetic process. Unless the identification between the translator and the poet he has chosen is perfect there will be no harmony and identity between the original poem and its translation. The translator, apart from the mastery over both the source language and the target language must have complete empathy with the original poet. It is the first step towards creative translation. Insofar as all art idealises, some degree of idealisation is inevitable even in translation. That it should be subtle and not constitute any major deviation or departure from the original is an aim that no responsible translator could ever overlook. Authenticity and sincerity are the sterling qualities in literature as well as in life, and all worthwhile translations should inhere them unmistakably. The translator must mediate between the original poet and his readers, wandering between two worlds; one discovered, another built anew. From the original to the translation it is a veritable pilgrim’s progress. To bring out of its native ground an original poem and take it into the new realms of gold is an act of literary elopement where like Lochinvar the translator rides away with his sweetheart home. Mammata, the Sanskrit critic, in Kavyaprakasha, his book of poetics, likens poetry to a beloved. All poetry inheres the eternal love story and the poet is a great lover. So ought to be the translator. The original poem must haunt him day and night like a magnificent obsession and with its aerial kisses feed his thought’s wilderness. It must first be completely assimilated and inhaled and then reincarnated in altogether a new language which is foreign and different. After all love is the secret of all success. There could be one paramount purpose of poetic translation: love of the original poem revealing itself in translation. The translator is not a traitor betraying the original. He is a great lover.
riding away with his lady love in fresh linguistic fields. He restructures the original poem in a new incarnation of translation after releasing it from its first language.

When we turn to Indian writing in English we at times tend to fumble for masterpieces. There is a popular charge that Indian poetry in English has hardly any masterpieces to offer. But that does not mean that India has not produced masterpieces. One must direct one’s search to literature in Sanskrit and the regional languages. Beginning with the *Vedic Hymns* and the *Upanishads* and the great ancient epics, *Rama-yana* and *Mahabharata* down to the modern times across the great classical age of Sanskrit literature India has offered to the world several classics. They are not in English, but quite a few of them are translated into English.

In spite of reaction against Rabindranath Tagore, akin to the reaction against Tennyson at the turn of the century, Tagore remains one of our greatest poets of all time. He is a poet with cosmic consciousness. Now he could surely write in English if he would, for very few writers could handle a foreign language with feeling and imagination as Tagore did. He could easily evolve an idiom, a diction in English so competently that even the foreign language acquired grace, lucidity, and spontaneity of expression. But Tagore refused to do any of his creative experiments in English.

How then to create in a foreign language with one’s sensibility intact? Of all arts, the problem of manipulation of medium is paramount in poetry. For, the other media—colour, canvas, stone etc.,—are cold, distant, inert. They exist independent of art and apart from the artist. But words have most intimate existence; nor are they static, dead, or distant. They are the very part of the poet’s existence and consciousness, inherent in his being. We do live in an age in which words seem to be losing their connotations day in and day out. But not so in poetry. Poetry is a sanctuary of words where they stay uneroded. No. words, no literature. The poetic experience without words would be feeling without form. They
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are not mere envelopes. Poetry structures itself in words while structuring reality.

And hence all the masters of literature wrote in their own and not in a foreign language. Sensibility is untranslatable, and one needs a genius to evolve an idiom in a foreign language to vie with the first language for the creative purpose. Think of Shakespeare writing in Greek or Latin or Kalidas in English! They must be translated in spite of all obstacles in our way if they must not be confined to a limited language area.

Translation involves a process of not merely transition; it is communication across cultures. A poem in translation is an expatriate of the world of letters, at least a second class citizen. But it still retains its roots in its own culture with the self at home, its shadows falling abroad. It would none the less be true to say that a masterpiece in translation is far above a second-rate work written in an acquired language. And hence the importance of translation, which is certainly not a mechanical but re-creative if not creative process.

How is poetry actually translated? A poem on a printed page is finite, cold, even dead. It is certainly not autotelic. Like the Sleeping Beauty it goes on sleeping until the Prince Charming, the reader, awakens her with his loving magic touch. The moment it comes into contact with the reader it springs to life, and its action is in full swing. It refuses to stick to the page, which is like a cage, and like a bird set free, it takes off to fly in the sky of the reader's consciousness. A finite poem then sprawls into immensity, into infinite time.

The degree of animation will however depend on the measure of its inherent worth, quality, and power as well as the reader's understanding and response. Once free from the printed page it is also in a way quite a bit released from its verbal envelope while it spreads over the reader's consciousness. Translation must also involve this release. For, the process of translation is quite close, even akin to the poetic process. The translator of poetry must inevitably step into the poet's shoes. The problem for the translator is not easy. If he tries to translate a poem as it lies inanimate and static in cold print,
it would be easy and literal, but it won't be poetry. He ought to catch it in its full animation. The only way is empathetic. The translator must identify himself with the moment of original creation and attempt a sort of re-creation closely following the contours of the original creative experiment. If a poem is incarnated in its original language, it must be reincarnated in translation. By pinning himself down to the printed page, the translator can hope to do nothing worthwhile beyond linguistic transport. What he will hook will be only a semblance of the original, dull and heartless. For, translation is not merely a mode of communication in another language. It is a re-creative process, an act of imagination involving comparative and contrastive linguistics.

It would be pertinent to register here an evidence of my experience of translating a song of Meera, the medieval Queen of Mewar. She is one of the best beloveds in all our world of song, lost in Krishna's love. Here is a love song:

**Eternal Love**

Even if you snap your love,
I shan't ever my Lord.
Snapping my bond with you, O Krishna,
To whom shall I be bound?
You're spread out like a tree,
Into a nestling turned I;
You ripple like a lake,
Like a fish I flow.
You've become mountain high,
And into your shadow turned I;
You are the moon, O Lord,
I am your chakora!
You're pearls, my Lord,
And I run like a thread;
You're pure gold,
And I am adorned.
Meera says: My Master dwells in Brij.
You’re my Lord, O Krishna,
I am forever your maid, my Lord!

Her life was a pilgrimage of eternity in quest of Krishna. The legend says that she was persecuted, insulted, abused, and even given a cup of poison. But in the hemlock she saw her Lord:

It’s the talk of the town,
everywhere broadcast;
hers husband offered her hemlock,
but Meera drank it up;
and she was lost in utter ecstasy!

Let us return to the poem ‘Eternal Love’. “Poetry is musical thought” says the poet. Thought could be translated, but not so easily the music. Instead of translating the poem on the printed page I played an LP of Meera’s song in order to capture its original music and rhythm, and it sprang to life in melodies wafting in the air. Poetry is indeed, as Wordsworth calls, ‘musical thought’. It awakened my auditory imagination, and my response assumed new dimensions. Take for instance these two lines:

\[ \text{tum bhaye sarovar} \]
\[ \text{mai bhayi machhiya} \]

You ripple like a lake
Like a fish I flow

If you translate literally it would be thus:

You became a lake
And I became a fish.

But I attempted to capture the poem in animation. I allowed it to re-echo out of my own response. I was aware of the method Valery followed in translating Eclogues, “a native an
unconscious identification with the imagined, still fluid state of the mind of the poet". I, too, imagined the nascent mind of Meera. Meera must have been at a lake then. Lost in Krishna's love, she must be looking for him everywhere in the lake also. The crystal clear water under the blue sky must have for a while mirrored her sky-blue Krishna. But in the rippling water her Shyam must have been soon submerged! Her vision was lively, not static. And I exercised my autonomy as a translator by translating my response. I endeavoured to re-create Meera's day-dream into a lively and eternal experience. The simple past was at once turned into the simple present. Meera's dream was not stagnant, nor was her Krishna static who seemed rhythmically rippling on the waves of water. While the lover ripples, the beloved keeps swimming in the lake like a fish. What one translates is not only the poem but also one's respone.

You ripple like a lake,
Like a fish I flow...

While translating another Gujarati poem "The Sea and the Moon" I was struck by the way the poem in translation emulated alliteration in the original not merely as a trope but as a poetic strategy. Anyone familiar with the long summer days in the Indian countryside knows how silence reigns there, only to be made more intense by the koel's cooing. The monotony of its cooing is communicated alliteratively in the original thus:

'Kamini kokila keli kujan karè
The English version follows pat:
'The captivating koel coos ceaselessly'.

And the monotony is most poetically driven home effortlessly through alliteration in translation also. The process of translation follows closely the poetic process, and translation becomes discovery. While uncovering a poem linguistically one discovers it while re-covering it in a new language.
Translation is exploration, and the translator an explorer. But no two translators are alike, no two translations. For, the translator must inevitably chart uncharted contours of the inner linguistic and imaginative contours of poetry. Take for instance the two English versions of "Hamlet" by Boris Pasternak. It is astonishing how the translations vary.

"Hamlet"

The murmurs ebb; on to the stage I enter.
I am trying, standing in the door,
To discover in the distant echoes
What the coming years may hold in store.
The nocturnal darkness with a thousand
Binoculars is focussed on to me.
Take away this cup, O Abba, Father,
Everything is possible to thee.
I am fond of this thy stubborn project,
And to play my part I am content.
But another drama is in progress,
And, this once, O let me be exempt.
But the plan of action is determined,
And the end irrevocably sealed.
I am alone; all round me drowns in falsehood:
Life is not a walk across a field!

Lydia Slater Pasternak thus translates this "New Soliloquy". But the same poem is translated differently by Max Hayward and Manya Harari and we notice a world of difference about the inner and outer structures of these two versions.

The stir is over. I step forth on the boards.
Night and its mark transfix and pin me,
Staring through thousands of binoculars.
And I consent to play this part therein;
But another play is running at this moment,
So, for the present, release me from the cast.
And yet, the order of the acts has been
schemed and plotted
And nothing can avert the final curtain's fall.
I stand alone. All else is swamped by Pharisaism.
To live life to the end is not a childish task.

This makes a case for not only diversity but also autonomy in translation.

T. S. Eliot in his essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent" states that "Criticism is as inevitable as breathing". Substitute the word "criticism" by "translation" and you have an affirmation most legitimate to the Indian situation. Like the continent of Europe, India is polyglot with tremendous linguistic diversity but a common cultural heritage. Though the languages throw up linguistic barriers, translation builds the bridge of understanding.