

Translating "Um"

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"In Other Words: A Translator's Journal", is a collection of extracts from William Weaver's log of his translation of Umberto Eco's most recent novel *L'Isola di Giorgio Palma*, published in English as *The Island of the Day Before*, in Portuguese as *A Ilha do Dia Anterior* (tradução Marco Luchesi, ed. Record, São Paulo, 1995). The diary makes fascinating reading for the translator; it is an insight into one of the best-selling translators of a very difficult novelist to translate.

Weaver's contact with Eco is very close. He consults Eco several times: before the project is started, after the first draft is made, and then several times to check on obscure the obscure vocabulary Eco uses which comes from 17th century nautical, shipbuilding, astronomy, fortification and alchemy, and bibles translated into Italian in the 17th century.

Weaver is personally involved in the translation. He feels happy after a good day, treating himself with whisky and wine. He shares the excitement of Eco's "eco-ian" or "eco-lalic" "arias", is amazed when Eco, "his writer" dares "to invent an Inferno", an area "out of bounds" for an Italian writer. The relationship is intimate, Eco is "Um". But the servile nature of the translator is very evident. When in Eco's presence, Weaver always feels that he is "exposing his ignorance". He admires "Um" enjoying pulling down books to illustrate the various problems: "With him, I always feel like a student."

But the admiration is not blind: Eco is not 100% perfect: he is worried about anachronisms, but Weaver wonders whether "liquidare" and "eliminare" were used in the 16th century meaning "to kill". Eco also points out problems, but is less good at solving them. He has confi-

dence in his translator, giving his disciple/translator a very free hand "to invent anything that achieves the desired effect (literal fidelity is of no importance)".

Weaver's relationship with the Chief Editor at Harcourt Brace is equally close. Drenka Willen is "ecstatic, positively effervescent, both about the book and the translation". They dine and lunch and spend days together correcting and discussing terms, some of which the copy editor has suggested. Weaver is prepared for a combat to defend himself against the suggested corrections, but it seems he is given "star", special treatment, treated with "care and respect" by the copy editor. He is even allowed to put an "s" on "toward", "against all house rules". Some of the more extravagant words have to be "tamed": "frugiferous" becomes "plenteous", and Weaver has to sing Purcell to maintain "I, attempt from love's sickness to fly" to get his way, but they uncannily often reach the same decision at the same time. It is in her nature as Chief Editor to wish to clarify all obscure points; whereas the author wishes to maintain them. The editor wants to substitute the Hebrew word for "dove". Weaver faxes Eco, who is exasperated and decides to eliminate the whole of the short paragraph. The translator Weaver enters as the peacemaker and satisfies the editor by slightly rewording the paragraph. Eco's stature, and also Weaver's reputation, save the style of the original.

Indeed, the conditions under which Weaver translates seem ideal. He works from an Italian villa, driving through the scenic Appenines in an air-conditioned car to stay in the author's villa. And Weaver goes back to visit Eco with a list of queries and problems. He is respected by the copy editor and chief editor, he spends time in New York, where he teaches, at the New York Public Library, and at the Library of Congress in Washington. He is able to make contact with specialists in important fields: an expert in arms and fortifications at Vassar College, a fencing amateur, an expert in navigational problems. Eco puts him in touch with experts in the history of science and philosophy and a curator at the Museo di Storia Della Scienza in Florence. Day-to-day problems are minor: a slight worry over his contract (which is resolved), a tractor wakes him too early in the morning when staying at Eco's country villa, the water in the well at his own villa is at a dangerously low level, "phone

calls announce presences in Tuscany, friends arriving from the US. And all want/expect to come for lunch, that hated meal, destroyer of my days", and bouts of sciatica (a typical translator's problem?) disturb his work.

Weaver's technique is to first make a skeleton draft and gradually fill it out, translating, on good days, some ten, even fifteen, pages. The first draft is ready in under four months, then much more time is spent on the various revisions. At the beginning of the translation, most sentences needed to be revised. When he reached the end, only a few revisions per page needed to be made. Weaver uses the image of sculpture: little by little he will mould the wet clay and bring it to life.

The translation and the original were almost published at the same time. Indeed, the original had not yet been published when the translation was started and Weaver did not know the title. Both Weaver and Eco preferred *La Colomba Color Arancio*, *The Orange Dove*. As there were no reviews yet, Weaver felt much closer to his author, sharing a secret. This privacy only ends when he sends Harcourt Brace his first acceptable draft. Eco played a large role in the translation: he wanted it to be as fluent as possible. He sends the translators his "instructions for translators" which forbid the translators from using any words that came into existence after the 17th century. He also hates footnotes. A Dr. Byrd drops English words into his Italian speech. Weaver says that the "old-fashioned solution was an asterisk and a note, "in English in the original". But both Weaver and Eco find this technique too intrusive, it will remind "the reader that what he is reading is not the original". Therefore Weaver leaves Dr. Byrd's speech in English and lets it blend in with the text, losing the difference. Getting the right tone of the Italian 16th century was a problem. Byrd's English words in the original are spelt in Jacobean English, but he can't mix 20th century and Jacobean English and so eliminates the archaic spellings. He feels great relief when he discovers in the OED that "sapper" was originally used in the 1600s and not in this century, as he had feared.

Readability, fluency, the right effect, the non-appearance of the translator are the bywords of the translation and Weaver's style of translation. Venuti's insistence on the "visibility" of the translator may have

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achieved popularity and recognition in the academic world, even in some poetry translation. But for Weaver and Eco the translator must remain invisible.

References

WEAVER, William. "In Other Words: A Translator's Journal". In: *New York Review of Books*, November 19, 1995, pp. 16-20.

VENUTI, Lawrence. *The Translator's Invisibility*. London, Routledge, 1995.