

LITERARY SELF-TRANSLATION by John Calabro

[1] A personal journey into the minefield that is self-translation.

WHY did I engage in an exercise of self-translation? [2] The short answer is because I am crazy. [3] For years I had a nagging but persistent desire to see my first book, an 80-pages recit called *Bellecour*, [3a] translated from English to French. Last summer, in between writing projects and having re-acquired the publication rights of *Bellecour*, I got the crazy notion to translate it myself.

[4] Knowing quite well that I was stepping into a minefield.

[5] I was not a total stranger to the concept of translation, I had two books translated by H  l  ne Rioux, a great professional translator, but I was a total stranger to the concept of self-translation. When the [5a] AICW put out a call for presentations, it seemed to be a sign; I decided to document the journey and to submit as a presentation the process of self-translation using my own experience. Fear and worry set in immediately. I was not completely confident in my ability to succeed in such a task.

[6,a] I lived in France for ten years as a child, from year 2-12, and have kept up with the French language through reading, watching, listening, speaking and visiting France as often as possible, where I still have family. But, I write only in English. I was worried about my level of bi-lingualism. I didn't know if I had all the **linguistic** and **literary** tools needed to succeed. Nevertheless, I decided to go ahead and if I failed, I would present at this conference why I failed.

[7] **BEFORE** starting, I decided to research the concepts, theories and ideas around literary self-translations. I was surprised as to the amount of research done on the topic. Even our own Maria Pia Spadafore had written about it [8] Anton Popovič, the definitive expert on translation theory, simply and evidently defines self-translation as *‘the translation of one’s own works into another language by the author himself (Herself)’*.

[9] **Let's start with taking a closer look at Fidelity.** **Fidelity** to the original text being translated has always been at the heart of the discussion regarding translations and it is the same with self-translation. [9a] Changyong Zou , a Chinese academic, says that, *'To be absolutely faithful in translation has long been the ultimate goal for many translators.'* It is generally accepted that with translation by someone other than the author, the translator tries to be invisible and faithful to the original.

[10] There are allowances for equivalence, which according to [10a] Popovič, is not a simple "sameness" but can be categorized into four types: [10b]

1. Linguistic Equivalence: Word-for-word correspondence.
2. Paradigmatic Equivalence: Correspondence of grammar.
3. Textual Equivalence: Correspondence of the text structure.
4. Stylistic Equivalence: Functional equivalence aimed at achieving a similar **expressive** effect. Which I found to be the most important aspect of translation.

To achieve that fidelity or equivalence, some academic have suggested that, [11] *'self-translation may be the only possible answer toward faithfulness in translation'*.

[12] **That may not be the case.** Changyong Zou and others have found that, *'Though self-translation is supposed to be most faithful, it turns out to be the contrary. Compared with other translators, self-translators often put their creative genius into translation as well. They often add, delete, adapt when translating.'*

[13] Jemma Dunnill, a well-known Parisian translator agrees, [13a] *'Presumably, there is the pleasure inherent to the act of translation itself, and the pleasure (or pain) in revisiting certain characters, scenes, and dialogue, with the opportunity to imbue them with new life.'*

[14] I will give the final word to the late Umberto Eco, who said, *'Translating one's own work in another language is more a matter of rewriting a different book.'*

[14a] *è dubbio se esista l'autotraduzione allo stato puro...* [15]

[16] I WOULD never have attempted to engage in this self-translation project if it had not been for the advancement of online translation tools such as **[16a,b]** GOOGLE TRANSLATE and REVERSO, the two most used translating programs, as well as improvements in spellcheck, grammar check and the thesaurus embedded in the French version of a word-processor such as **[16c]** MICROSOFT WORD.

I debated using those machine translation tools but I asked myself how different was it from **printed and computer based research and linguistic tools** that I use when writing a novel in English? I decided to go ahead. It is important to differentiate these online writing tools that may have some artificial intelligence from AI tools like ChatGPT. **[16d]** I would not ask AI to write me a paragraph describing a landscape, a character, or to invent a dialogue between two characters. **[16e]** I find the use of AI in the arts an interesting development but also a very dangerous one.

[17] I started by using, separately, Google Translate and Reverso to translate page by page the whole original text from English to French, pasting the results in **[17a,b,c,d]** the French language Microsoft Word. This gave me access to the French dictionary, thesaurus and grammar check. I compared both machine translations to the original text and used what lines and words best reflected the original ...

[17e] ... Creating a combined version of the machine translations into one file, one manuscript.

I fixed as much of the spacing, grammar and spelling errors.

[18] In terms of results, Machine translation was excellent with word for word translation, **[18a]** for using the right accents, verbs, adjectives and the correct grammatical options but mostly **for simple sentences**. It was very good with inserting the French style of punctuation and spacing. **[19]**

[19a] **The problems** were often with complex masculine/feminine and singular/plural agreements, as well as with complicated verb agreements, specifically in long sentences with multiple clauses or purposely created sentence fragments.

[20] There were also **awkward translations**, [20a]for example: ‘**un lavage de vêtement** instead of *la lessive*, or, **atelier de réparation d’automobile** instead of *un garage*.’

At this stage, it was 90 percent mechanical and routine fixes and 10 percent creative input. When finished, I thought that I was almost there. Still, after an in-depth reading of the completed, translated and copy-editing text, the result was rather disappointing.

[21] There was something missing. Machine translation is a double edged sword, it gives you the appearance of having done the job but it is an illusion. The writing had no flow, no style. It had done **well** with what Popović called **Linguistic Equivalence**: Word-for-word correspondence. But [21,a] it had failed greatly at **Stylistic Equivalence**: *Functional equivalence aimed at achieving a similar expressive effect*. In other words it had sucked the creativity out of the manuscript.

[22]I began my literary edits and the difficult, but crucial task, of recreating and re-introducing the art and the originality that was now missing. It was at this point that I saw this rewriting as an opportunity for me to revisit the narrative and **to modify** it much like Ecco and self-translation academics had cautioned would happen.

I went much further than I had envisioned when I started this project. I relocated the whole narrative from Paris to Lyon, [23,a] because I had always envisioned this story taking place in Lyon where I lived throughout my adolescence, and had regretted having located the narrative in Paris simply for marketing reasons.

I went to Lyon and rewrote some scenes while there, adding and integrating real street names, describing neighbourhoods and landmarks and more. I added and removed certain small sections. I blended my changes with the original text as I edited. [24]

While editing, not bound to text fidelity, I felt free to modify and re-infuse creativity with impunity. I improved old and new **perceived weaknesses** in the characters. I added and removed small scenes. I re-wrote lines to improve the narrative, even **tweaking the ending**. The exercise stretched my ability to work in the French language and to develop a consistent style, create nuances, right tones, and imagery. It is here that I realised one of the traps of self-translation. [25] I had overestimated my ability to find the right words to achieve, ‘**Functional equivalence or a similar expressive effect.**’ Being able to understand French, through listening, watching and reading had given me a false confidence. Part of my knowledge came from understanding French words I didn’t know or wasn’t sure, **contextually**, and therefore giving me the false feeling of having a larger vocabulary than I had. The freshness in writing, as we all know, comes from finding the right words; **for that** we need words that give **impressions of meaning, not just meaning**. One needs a larger vocabulary, knowledge of idioms, sayings, expressions or regional words, and most difficult of all, era-appropriate dialogue. I was lucky that my narrative took place mostly in the sixties which is when I lived in France and thus I was knowledgeable with that particular vocabulary. [26] **Creative intuition** which I relied on when writing a novel in English, was not as sharp when working in French and it took a while for me to bring that creativity to the surface. It was hard work, complex and demanding, but strangely enough, I enjoyed this part of the process. I was happy with the end results.

[27] Here is a sample paragraph of Machine versus Human Translation that illustrates the process and the issues that came with it.

[28] **Original text in English [READ TEXT ON SCREEN]**

Two steps into the paved road, his head fully turned, mocking his pursuers, I watch in stolid horror the slow motion of an inevitable impact, of screaming tires, of a muted thump and of a body in the air, sent there by the front bumper of a grey Citroen... And

when the body of Abdullah finally hits the stone; a weak yelp. Something cracks and he stops whimpering.

[28a] Machine translation [READ TEXT ON SCREEN]

À deux pas de la route pavée, la tête complètement tournée, se moquant de ses poursuivants, je regarde avec une horreur impassible le ralenti d'un impact inévitable, de pneus hurlants, d'un bruit sourd et d'un corps en l'air, envoyé là par le pare-chocs avant d'une Citroën grise... Et quand le corps d'Abdullah frappe enfin la pierre – un cri faible. Quelque chose se fissure et il arrête de pleurnicher.

At first read it doesn't sound too bad, but it is a bit of an illusion. Here are the issues:

[28b] Final translation

. *Illogical translation...* À deux pas de la route, *the boy can't be hit by the car if he is not on the road and I changed it to* **Deux pas dans la rue pave...**

. *Inaccurate translation...* **Quelque chose se fissure...** *implies cement breaking and I changed to* **craque** *implies bones breaking.*

. *Weak translation...* **je regarde** to **je vois**, because I look is weaker than I see...

pleurnicher to **gemir** *because whimpering is weaker, not as accurate as moaning*

. *Literary changes...* **de pneus hurlants** to **un crissement de pneus**, which implies friction of rubber against hard surface and sounds better. **Crissement** is more of an onomatopoeia. This is where **machine translation fails badly**, when needing to make a literary choice as to the best word, adjective, verb among many synonyms; it can't differentiate between a mediocre and a great translation. It sucks the creativity out.

[29a,b] I also sent the same paragraph to **Hélène Rioux** to see how a professional translator compared to both the machine and to the self-translator. Her translation of the Cousin was short listed for a GG.

[30] Hélène Rioux translated it this way **[30a] ... [DON'T READ TEXT]**

I will just point to obvious differences. In general while I rewrote whole sentences she followed the original text a lot closer. Notice that her version brought in new words that I would not have thought of like **il nargue**/moquant, **je perçois**/je vois, **couinement**/cri, **le sol**/la rue.

In general, she validated my self-translation and was able to find better words than machine translation.

When finished, I found that I had kept about fifty percent of the machine translation and changed or modified the other fifty percent.

[31] AT THIS POINT, I had a completed manuscript but I wanted confirmation as to the publishing readiness of the manuscript from a native speaker, not unlike seeking an English editor when finishing a novel in English. I was fortunate to have my cousin Isabelle, **[32]** a French teacher who lives in Lyon, who had studied English literature, had edited and translated manuscripts from Italian to French, who offered to copyedit my manuscript. She corrected grammar and spelling errors I had missed, and noted where the phraseology needed improving or strengthened. We worked on it together for a number of weeks. She was a life saver and caught many small issues that inevitably crop-up over 80 pages that only a native speaker would be able to see. **And last**, back in Toronto, my friend and French native, **[32a] Karine Boucquillon** gave the manuscript one more look, of course she found a few more small issues. At the end, I finally had a completed self-translation of *Bellecour*, one that I was very, very happy with.

[33] IN CONCLUSION: My experience with the technology was a good one, but it is still an imperfect tool and as of now incapable to do a sophisticated translation job. It cannot recreate, sustain and transfer the style and nuances from the original text to the translated one.

The quality of my final manuscript was quite good but only after I spent countless hours on the rewrites and used the editing help of my cousin/editor. It was very much like writing a new book. As to Umberto Eco's statement regarding whether the final product is a **translation or a new work of fiction in a different language?** I believe that mine is a new work especially since my narrative was relocated from Paris to Lyon, but it is probably true of **most self-translations**.

In the end, through self-translation, notwithstanding the relocation of the narrative, I had modified maybe 25 % of the original text, something that a hired translator would not have done.

I also felt that my **new text** was very much my own book, unlike my other translated novels, which felt more remote. I felt closer to it and it felt more satisfying.

[33,a,b] Being a new work, it deserved and got a new title, *Bellecour* became *18 Rue Bellecombe*.

Would I advise it? No, not unless one is **honestly**, fluently bilingual **in writing**, as well as speaking the language of the translation, and also **totally and presently immersed** in both cultures and languages. Even then, it is a long, demanding and complicated task. I found that more often than not, **a writer who is a self-translator** needs to compensate from the fact that he **or** she goes from a stronger language, the one they usually write in, to one that may be a bit weaker, less frequently used, a bit more distant.

Did I enjoy the experience? Yes, I enjoyed it, in a perverse kind of way. It reconnected me to my past in Lyon and so it was personally a great experience. I would probably not do it again. This was a one-off project because all the circumstances for success seemed to be present, but I am not sure I could duplicate that for other projects. **[34] THANK YOU.**