

# Introduction: Creative Writing, Poetry, Translation, and Teaching

## *Escritura creativa, poesía, traducción y enseñanza*

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When the editors of *Rilce* and I discussed a possible section for the journal, we agreed that creative writing and its relation to translation and culture would be a good topic. Some interesting work had been done in Spain and I could offer some experience in this subject in North America, Europe, and China. This special section provides such a comparative approach. The work in Spain has been productive and suggestive. Before getting to the contributions in this section, I would like to discuss some related works as part of a framework or context, and call attention to some publications concerning Spain, Britain and China-United States relations through the Iowa workshop, translating poetry and writers as translators.

The first work concerns poetry and translation in Spain. Bruno Echaury Galván and Silvia García Hernández discuss poets and translators sharing a classroom and seeking goals through poetry and translation (see Echaury/García 2020). Writing and pedagogy are the subject of this article, which is based on «the development of an innovative teaching project carried out at the University of Alcalá during the academic year 2016-2017» (Echaury/García 2020, 186). The underlying idea is that some of the students in Hispanic Studies showed literary talents and wrote poems for students in Modern Languages and Translation to translate, something mutually beneficial (186). This project was in keeping with the work of Holmes and Mouton (2001) and Spiro (2004) that «argued that creative writing – and especially poetry writing – promotes language acquisition and helps reinforce second language learning in a natural way» (Echaury/García 2020, 186). For

Echauri and García, the middle way is best in translating poetry, that is between the views of Ezra Pound and Umberto Eco (Echauri/García 2020, 198; see Gentzler 1993; Eco 2004; 2008). According to Echauri and García, Pound sees «the translator as an artist who should be allowed enough freedom to recraft the poem in his/her own terms» whereas Eco «prefers to move away from the literal sense and introduce the concept of “negotiation”» (Echauri/García 2020, 198). Here, Echauri and García recommend that translators «go beyond the source text and try to recreate it in another language through a balance between being faithful to the poem and sacrificing some of its features, which requires a more active role on the part of the translator» (198). This is a sensible way between two creative writers, Pound and Eco, who also wrote criticism and theory and who were themselves university teachers, although Pound gave up formal teaching early. In discussing the translation of idioms and colloquialisms, for instance, Echauri and García recommend studying not simply the poem to be translated but other poems by the poet (199, see Gómez Pato 2012). To conclude, Echauri and García argue for the «high degree of transferability of the project» in which other «professors can build an attractive task encompassing creative writing and translation, which implies an improvement of the teaching and learning process to all the parties involved» (199). Research and teaching complement each other in all fields and this is also true in creative writing and translation, including the creation and translation of poetry inside and outside the classroom.

Moreover, the second publication I am examining here to provide a framework relates to the connection between translation and poetry in the context of creative writing in Britain. Susan Bassnett, someone I met in the early 1990s at Warwick and who was already well established in the field then, has much of interest to say about literary translation (Bassnett 2014; see Earnshaw/Barrington 2014). For instance, Bassnett gets to the nub of the matter:

The relationship between translation and creative writing is a vexed one: many writers translate, though often their translations have received less critical attention than the rest of their work, since translation does not enjoy the same status as what is termed creative writing, particularly in the English-speaking world. Translation is often despised as some kind of secondary activity. (2014, 367)

She contrasts Nabokov’s view that the less talented translation destroys the author with Paz’s idea that translation helps us to get to know the world and

our discourse (Nabokov [1963] 2018; see also Bassnett 2002). Bassnett quotes the preface of the translators of the King James Bible (Authorized Version) in 1611, and it is such an inspiring view of translation that I will quote it here: «Translation it is that openeth the window, to let in the light; that breaketh the shell, that we may eat the kernel; that putteth aside the curtaine, that we may look in to the most Holy place; that remooveth the cover of the well, that we may come by the water» (A. V. Bible Preface 6.8, quoted in Bassnett 2014, 371). This is not translation as some kind of secondary activity that needs an apology or to be left in obscurity. Bassnett, herself a talented translator, concludes: «Translation is a complex, multi-layered literary activity that has not received the critical attention it deserves, but it is the means whereby readers can move beyond the confines of their own language and literature and encounter other worlds» (Bassnett 2014, 373). Part of what this special section in *Rilce* on creative writing and translation is doing is to give some more critical attention to translation but also, more specifically, to its relation to poetry and creative writing more generally.

The third work is an article that looks at the relation among poetry, translation and politics between China and the United States as seen through the Iowa workshop (see Liu 2017). The International Writing Program (IWP) at Iowa is something on which Yi-hung Liu sheds light. East and West met in many ways beyond the work of Ezra Pound. Liu helps us to understand the role of Iowa in the context of East and West: «The IWP owed its initial establishment and renowned reputation to an American poet and a Chinese novelist, Paul Engle and Hualing Nieh» (Liu 2017, 611; see Engle/Nieh Engle 1976; Nieh/Engle 1987; Engle 1999; Bennett 2015; Rubin 2012). The translation of Mao Zedong is a case in point about the relation between this Chinese poet and revolutionary political figure and the co-translators, Nieh and Engle. Liu notes a tension between poet and translators: «Thus when Engle and Nieh translated Mao's poems, the otherness of Mao and the self-image of the translators were concurrently produced» (Liu 2017, 623). Liu uses Mao's poem «The Long March» and the translation and notes of the translators – what is left out and what is stressed – as an illustration of the choices and politics the translation involved (Liu 2017, 623). One aspect of this difference between Mao and his two translators Liu emphasizes: «As Engle and Nieh's representation of Mao Zedong reproduces the ideological antagonism between family and communism, it formulates a figure of an oriental other based on the already otherized communism» (2017, 624). Liu also reads Mao's poem «Swimming» as an ins-

tance of the divide between poet on the one hand and Engle and Nieh, his translators, on the other before interpreting Edgar Snow's translation of «The Long March», which shows more empathy with Mao and the Communists (Liu 2017, 625-26, see Snow 1938). Liu's reading calls attention to the postcolonial and proposes a reinterpretation of the International Writing Program in Iowa. She begins with a film about that Program and proposes that another film be made. Here, the translation of poetry is a political act in the tensions between the imperial and anti-imperial. Perhaps there is some liminal space between the making and translation of poetry. Ideology tries to bend words even as the wind.

The challenge of translating poetry, which is well known, is something Clare Sullivan sums up to begin her exploration: «Poetry works by engaging with the various structures of language and often by pushing the boundaries of what words are expected to do» (Sullivan 2019, 268). Sullivan discusses stylistics, including metaphor, as «a repertoire of [...] the particularities of a given language and the way that poets play with their languages» (Sullivan 2019, 268; see Boase-Beier 2006, 4) while also exploring the melding of form and content (Sullivan 2019, 269; see Underhill 2016, 41). Sullivan looks at the instance of Natalie Toledo and examines translation in terms of diction – a Nahuatl word «coyol» as it is left in the translation of the poem «Bacchus» to Spanish and English – (Sullivan 2019, 277; see Toledo 2015, 65). Sullivan is the translator into English. As poetry is not generally commercial, Sullivan agrees with Francis Jones that translators of poetry have more choice than other translators what to choose and how long to take in translating (Sullivan 2019, 279; see Jones 2011, 186).

Another view is that of writers and translators (see Woodsworth 2019; see also Washbourne/Van Wyke 2019). Judith Woodsworth discusses translation by major writers, examining why they translate, how they choose works to translate, how they see themselves as translators and she does so in terms of habitus, constraints to which they were subjected, their stances as writers in relation to what can be seen as a secondary creation – translation (Woodsworth 2019, 369). Woodsworth quotes Ezra Pound, who admires Geoffrey Chaucer as translator, paraphraser and condenser (Woodsworth 370; see Pound 1931, 44). Poets can also be translators and their translation can help borrow from other languages and poetic traditions to deepen their own poetry and poetic and literary tradition in their language.

This context or framework leads us to the articles in the section itself. The editor of *Rilce* has provided scope for work outside and inside Spain to ex-

plore some of the relations among translation, culture, poetry, and creative writing, and for that I am thankful to this distinguished colleague. I also thank the anonymous readers who improved my work and that of the contributors.

The first article is by Guo Rong, whom I got to know through J. Hillis Miller and who was working with a Chinese scholar, Wang Ning, whom I had known since the 1990s. Guo Rong, an experienced translator and a scholar in comparative literature, begins the body of the issue by exploring the relation between poetry and translation in examples from my poetry. Guo begins with Eugene Nida's correspondence theory about translation then chooses two poems and translations of them into Chinese from the selection of my poetry published with Shanghai Jiao Tong University Press, as part of six volumes by and about me, to analyze closely the poems and the translations to illustrate the compromise and cultural negotiation in the act of translation. Like Jacques Derrida, Guo sees translation as being similar to the tower of Babel, something that can never be completed (see Steiner 1975). Guo's detailed analysis is a model for close attention to the translation of poetry helpful to those who know Chinese and others, like me, who have little or no Chinese.

My own contribution is a discussion of the scholarship in teaching creative writing and the role of translation in that and in my own teaching of literature or the holding of seminars in creative writing in China. I argue that creative writing and translation have a complex connection in writing, scholarship, the classroom and more and that the philosophical context of mimesis and anti-mimesis is important in the work of writers, translators, critics, scholars, teachers and students. This article examines Plato, Roger Ascham, Immanuel Kant and others in connection with writing and translation and examines contributions to this debate East and West before discussing my experience particularly in Canada, England, China and the United States. The nub of my argument is that translation is creative, for reading, writing and translation, all of which are forms of interpretation. Translators of poetry should be poets who create anew or recreate the poems. The translators become poets if they were not before.

The following two articles reflect on the introduction of creative writing in the University curriculum in Spain. Guadalupe Arbona's contribution describes the Creative Writing Master at Universidad Complutense de Madrid, through several examples of literary exercises and teaching methods that aim to stimulate and strengthen each student's voice. Arbona establishes

the need to develop new University disciplines that enhance creativity with an emphasis on critical experiences (personal and literary). Besides, she proposes a definition of «the writer's voice», to include self-knowledge, his/her way of perceiving reality and the arts, and, finally, the driving force of creative writing. Emphasizing the personal in writing, this article contributes to renewing the teaching of the Humanities in the midst of the so-called era of Artificial Intelligence.

Furthermore, Javier de Navascués discusses the project «Writing a story» in the Minor in Creative Writing of the Degree in Spanish Language and Literature at the University of Navarra since 2019-2020. This teaching innovation project on creative writing, based on the collaboration of academics and writers, seeks to integrate the specific skills of creative writing into a university setting through the writing of a novel. Two aspects deserve highlighting. First, the students are introduced to the analytical reading of contemporary novels to develop narrative skills in their own creative writing. Secondly, there are many critical voices because referees with different areas of expertise and experiences in literature assess the work of the students. De Navascués sees that this procedure helps the students to hone their narrative skills and he hopes that, in some cases, it will lead to the publication of a novel.

It is possible that Engle and Nieh were not being hyperbolic in a global, multi-polar and multicultural world when they said: «Translation is part of the world's survival» (1976, 2). I would add so are reading, writing and the arts. So, too, is science. Creative writing and translation stretch us beyond ourselves, our own ignorance, reaching for understanding of others and ourselves, words and worlds.

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