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# Introduction

A translation dilemma is among my earliest memories. I was five, seated at a large table with many other children in a kindergarten classroom, making cards for Mother’s Day. Together we folded stiff sheets of white paper, and constructed and pasted pink crepe-paper roses with green stems to the cover. The assistant teacher circled the table, spraying some perfume into each of our roses. Inside the card, we all had to hand-write the same message: “Dear Mom, happy Mother’s Day.” This part of the project stymied me, given that my mother was not “Mom” but “Ma.” I was embarrassed to insert the Bengali term I used and knew her by—the one she recognized and responded to. I was also reluctant to resort to the English term, which sounded foreign to me, and would have certainly alienated, even offended her.

The memory is still fresh, though I can no longer remember what I chose to write inside the card. Revisiting that dilemma now, in 2021, it occurs to me that it has just as much to do with

the act of writing as it does with translation. In other words, as soon as I learned how to write in English, which was one of the two languages I knew and spoke as a child, I simultaneously intuited the central and complex role that translation was to play. It also reminds me of the role, just as central and complex, that my mother was to play in my life as a writer, both as subject and inspiration.

In 2000, the year after my first book of short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies*, was published, I wrote an essay called “To Heaven without Dying” for the online magazine *Feed*. I was still new to the world of writing, still getting used to the idea of having become a writer in the first place. In that essay—the first occasion I had to assess my evolving creativity entirely on my own terms—I speak of being born into a “linguistic world split in two.” I refer to my writing, in English, as a form of cultural translation, and to some of the stories in that collection as a “translation of India.” Reflecting on writing short stories in English about characters who talk in Bengali in my head, I note the need to translate their dialogue, thus turning them, falsely but necessarily, into English speakers. I conclude, dramatically, “I translate, therefore I am.”

Over twenty years later, this statement has only intensified in significance. I risk quoting myself not only to signal that this is a book about translation, but to acknowledge that I have been thinking about translation for my entire conscious life. As that early essay already makes clear, becoming a writer in English meant becoming a translator as well. And yet, I was a translator before I was a writer, not the other way around. As a graduate student, for my master’s thesis, I’d translated some short stories by the great Bengali writer Ashapura Devi, thanks in great part to my mother’s willingness to read them out loud. I would tape-record her, play back the cassettes, and work off

our homemade audiobook, given that Bengali is a language I speak and understand but do not read with sophistication or ease. Before that formal project, in college, I had studied Latin and Ancient Greek. Once I'd learned enough grammar to be able to read texts, reading and translating melded into a single experience. That form of reading, dynamic and double, more active than passive, has remained the gold standard for me. But in fact I was translating even before that, even before I knew how to read. I was raised speaking and living, simultaneously, in English and Bengali, and this meant translating between them, constantly, for myself and for others.

The current volume gathers together my written thoughts about translation over the past seven years. I have spent these years teaching creative writing and translation at Princeton University, but before I came to Princeton I was living in Rome, where my linguistic landscape dramatically transformed, and Italian emerged like a new island in an archipelago, just as Ovid describes in the *Metamorphoses*: “and what deep water had covered / now emerges as mountains, dotting the sea with more Cyclades.”<sup>1</sup>

In Italy I began writing directly in Italian. I recounted this experience in *In altre parole*, my first book in Italian, later translated into English as *In Other Words*. The first essay in the present volume, “Why Italian?” is a coda to that book and also a point of departure, deepening and shedding further light on the basic question of why, after becoming a writer in English, and writing four works of fiction in English, I chose to write in Italian instead. I did not translate *In Other Words* myself; at the

<sup>1</sup> “quosque altum texerat aequor / existunt montes et sparsas Cycladas augent” (*Met.* 2.263–64). Translation in progress by Yelena Baraz and Jhumpa Lahiri.

time, I was putting all my energy into writing in Italian, and not translating anyone, never mind myself, into the language I know best.

But this was all to change in 2015. I left Rome and began teaching at Princeton, where I felt immediately and instinctively drawn to the world of translation. It was in and among other languages at Princeton that I felt most at home. “In Praise of Echo,” written in 2019 while I was back in Rome on sabbatical, grew out of the first literary translation workshops I taught at Princeton. And just as I was embarking on the teaching of literary translation, I became a bona fide translator myself, taking on the task of turning a novel called *Lacci* by Domenico Starnone, whom I’d met in Rome, into English.

*Lacci* (which became *Ties*) led to *Scherzetto* (*Trick*) and *Confidenza* (*Trust*); I have included my reflections on the experience of translating each of these novels, all of them by Starnone, in the present volume. I translated all three of them at Princeton. Another project I undertook at the university was the compiling and editing of *The Penguin Book of Italian Short Stories*, an anthology I was inspired to assemble due partly to the fact that numerous Italian short-story writers I’d discovered and wanted to share with my Princeton students, in English, had either not been translated to my satisfaction, or were only available in dated translations, or had not been translated at all. As I worked on that project, I realized that several of the authors in the book were not merely authors but also translators. I was struck by how many Italian writers of the previous century devoted considerable time and energy to practicing and promoting the art of translation, not only for personal mentorship and influence, but for furthering the essential aesthetic and political mission of opening linguistic and cultural borders, and of introducing readers to works they would not be able to access otherwise. As

I contemplated the contributions of these author-translators, I was grateful that my creative life had taken a turn, and that I could now count myself among them.

Alongside the translation of Starnone and other Italian authors, I was gravitating, after arriving at Princeton, toward the supremely disorienting and, some say, controversial act of translating myself. When I first attempted this, very early on after starting to write in Italian, I quickly withdrew my hand, feeling that English, with an unexpected snarl, had snapped at me. But in 2017 I set aside my fear and translated a short story I'd written called "Il confine," titling it "The Boundary."<sup>2</sup> That experience paved the way, eventually, for the translation of *Dove mi trovo*, a novel I wrote in Italian, and which I turned into *Whereabouts* in English. Though I've done it once, I don't know if I will translate another of my Italian books into English. It poses a particular challenge, though not an entirely unpleasant one. In any case, "Where I Find Myself" takes stock of the process of self-translation, at least in one specific instance, and stops to reconsider words like *original*, *authentic*, and *authorship*.

By now I feel inevitably drawn to a series of authors who lived, read, thought, and worked among different languages. Whether I am reading Aristotle or Gramsci or Calvino, the theme of translation is what rises to the surface and engages me most. Translation, at the moment, has become my primary heuristic key. I have included, here, a set of essays I think of as a casual dinner party comprised of a handful of authors I've been thinking about recently, seated together at a table with translation serving as a centerpiece. At the end of each essay, I specify its origin, as well as the location and the language in which I wrote it. I do so in order to emphasize that this is, essentially, a

<sup>2</sup> *The New Yorker*, January 29, 2018.

bilingual text composed in two distinct geographical settings, Princeton and Rome. I wrote three of the ten essays in Italian, and others were drafted in a hybrid of English and Italian before I converted them fully into English in their final form. The three Italian essays—“Why Italian?,” “*Lingua / Language*,” and “Calvino Abroad”—have been translated either by myself or by others who did the lion’s share before I sat down to adjust this or that.

For those who read and study Italian, I have included, in an appendix to the book, the essay on Calvino in its original form, as well as Domenico Starnone’s Italian translation of my English essay “Where I Find Myself.”<sup>3</sup> Given that I speak throughout this book about the experience of writing in Italian and about translating myself, or being translated, into English, these versions provide concrete examples of how an English-language writer migrates into Italian and back again. In the English essays, unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

After deliberating on how to order the essays, I have done so chronologically. I hope that this arrangement serves to tell its own story: to recount how my thinking about language and translation has evolved from project to project, and how my creative, personal, and intellectual perspectives have gradually, inevitably altered as a result. Placing the essays in chronological order allows me to chart my progress, and reminds me of how rapidly and radically things can change. “Why Italian?” was written before I had ever translated anything from Italian to English. By the time I wrote “Calvino Abroad,” I had translated

<sup>3</sup> Starnone also wrote the introduction, in Italian, to the latest American edition of *Interpreter of Maladies*, which I subsequently translated into English, so we have now become both translators and interpreters of one another.

the works of more than half a dozen Italian authors, Calvino among them, and had also translated my own Italian work.

My reflections over the past seven years have grown thanks to a great many authors who have written about the theory and practice of translation before me. They are a new and stimulating element in my reading diet, and now that I have the pleasure of teaching translation, I often assign texts about this intricate and enigmatic subject to my students, discovering and analyzing them together in the classroom. While I do not engage explicitly with other theorists and writers on translation in this book, my suggestions for further reading acknowledge my indebtedness to the texts that have influenced and guided me, and will perhaps enable readers to place this volume in a broader scholarly context.

The afterword that closes the book opens a new door—which is fact an old door—and talks about my current translation project, which is to co-translate Ovid's *Metamorphoses* from Latin into English with Yelena Baraz, my colleague in the Princeton Classics Department. I quoted from the *Metamorphoses* earlier in this introduction, and you will discover that I refer to it in more than one of the essays. In the world of translation, Ovid's great poem, for me, is the sun. No other text I know illuminates what translation does, means, or is with equal power, and without it as an ongoing point of reference, my understanding of life, language, and literature would go dark.

Translation has transformed my relationship to writing. It shows me how to work with new words, how to experiment with new styles and forms, how to take greater risks, how to structure and layer my sentences in different ways. Reading already exposes me to all this, but translating goes under the skin and shocks the system, such that these new solutions emerge in unexpected and revelatory ways. Translation establishes

new rhythms and approaches that cross-pollinate the process of contemplating and crafting my own work. The attention to language that translation demands is moving my writing not only in new directions, but into an increasingly linguistically focused dimension. In 2021, I published *Il quaderno di Nerina* in Italian,<sup>4</sup> a work that combines verse and prose. I would never have begun writing poetry without the intimate exposure to the Italian language that only translation can provide; this shift was particularly surprising given that I have never written poetry in English.

I have assembled this book not only because I have become a translator in the past seven years, but to reiterate that I have always been a translator. To be a writer-translator is to value both being and becoming. What one writes in any given language typically remains as is, but translation pushes it to become otherwise. Thanks to translation—the act of one text becoming another—the conversation I have been seeking to have with literature for much of my life now feels more complete, more harmonious, and far richer with possibilities.

Before I engaged seriously with translation, something in my life as a writer was missing. At this point, I can no longer imagine not working on a translation, just as I cannot imagine not working on—or thinking of working on—my own writing. I think of writing and translating as two aspects of the same activity, two faces of the same coin, or maybe two strokes, exercising distinct but complementary strengths, that allow me to swim greater distances, and at greater depths, through the mysterious element of language.

<sup>4</sup> I provisionally call this “Nerina’s Notebook” in English, as it does not yet have an English incarnation.

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