



**GETTING STARTED
IN LITERARY
TRANSLATION**

**The Making of a
Literary Translator**



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AMERICAN LITERARY TRANSLATORS ASSOCIATION

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The Making of a Literary Translator

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GETTING STARTED IN LITERARY TRANSLATION

The Making of a Literary Translator

The gifted translator is an alchemist who changes a piece of gold into another piece of gold. — Renato Poggioli

Translation at its best is indeed a kind of alchemy, as is any art. And like any artist, the literary translator must master many crafts to make that alchemy work. There is, however, no single path to producing a translation that is a work of art. Some literary translators begin as creative writers, others as language buffs; still others begin as students or teachers of literature. None of these beginnings is inherently better than the others, and many literary translators have a mixed background. Their craft requires them to work simultaneously as close readers, artists, linguists, critics, and scholars. They are ventriloquists—on the page.

Why in the world should one want to be a literary translator? Because of an irrepressible love of language and literature, first one's own literature, then others that call out to be heard in one's own language. — Bruce Berliand

It takes years of experience to become a first-rate translator, as it does to become a first-rate writer of any kind. However, there are skills that translators acquire at the beginning and then hone throughout their careers. Opportunities abound for study, practice, and perhaps most of all, interacting with other literary translators, who very often will be the best teachers. This Guide offers an overview of how to become a literary translator, but it is only that—a guide—not a prescription, because ultimately, literary translation is not a craft but an art.

The Basics

Most literary translators start out by acquiring a thorough knowledge of their “target” language—English, for purposes of this Guide—and a thorough knowledge of at least one foreign language. This means not only learning to speak that language but also becoming familiar with its culture—its literature, but also its history, politics, religions, arts, and daily life. Sometimes, literary translators who do not know the source language work in collaboration with a native speaker of the source language. This combination of skills and insights can be a highly effective translation strategy, especially when the translator is knowledgeable about the literary traditions of the original text.

1. Read widely

A translator is always the closest reader of a text; therefore, a translator must read widely, guided by a love of literature. This love of literature, in no matter what language, is the starting point for all good translation. A translator must have a firm grip on the range of styles found in both English and the source language.

The more familiar you are with the English-language literary traditions,

the better. You don’t have to enroll in a survey course of literature written in English, although you might want to do that. Looking for ideas of what to read next? Consult anthologies for suggestions of authors and works. Follow the book reviews to find new releases that might interest you. Ask your colleagues for recommendations.

To broaden your knowledge of the literature of your source language, you can read works in the original and in translation, as well as reviews of translations and commentary in both languages. Again, ask the authors you work with, native speakers of the source language, and other translators for reading recommendations.

2. Develop your writing skills

A translation is itself a new work in the target language, here, English. Notwithstanding a translator’s intrinsic love of a foreign language, then, the importance of knowing English well cannot be overemphasized. Most translators labor over their writing in solitude, but there are abundant opportunities for guidance in honing those skills.

Many books have been written about becoming a better writer, and these may be useful to literary translators as

well. Just as a writer benefits from writing, say, a certain number of pages per day, so, too, the beginning translator might do well to translate a poem a day, or a few pages of prose.

As you become more experienced, you will gradually develop methods of translating that seem most appropriate to you. In translating a novel, for example, you might make four passes through the text: a first pass to plunge into the story and style, a second to research and ponder specific problems that arose in the first, a third to cross-check with the original for errors and omissions, and a fourth to revise for style.

*On my first pass through a story or novel, I'm hunting for the author's voice, trying to hear it in my head in English. It's an intuitive search that requires a great deal of concentration, so at this stage I don't allow myself to stop to look up words, allusions, or any factual material. That kind of research is important—and I do litter the text with these questions—but it can be done later, after that first rush of inspiration. — **Marian Schwartz***

You might prefer to do the cross-check at an earlier stage, but that would still have to be a separate pass: it would be futile to try to cross-check

for errors and focus on aesthetic elements simultaneously. Although no two translators work in exactly the same way, many find themselves inspired at the first run-through to bring the text out of the original language and claim it for English immediately:

*In my own work, I initially produce a version that contains multiple options for particular words and phrases. Then, after as long a break as possible, I read through the first version, consulting the original text only occasionally, and try to produce a readable version. I think it's crucial to allow the English to stand on its own. The one thing I don't recommend, on the basis of my own experience and that of colleagues, is to produce a literal translation and try and turn it into English. I've known many translators who wasted hours using this method. The first version will be rough, but it should already sound like English and not translationese. — **Bill Johnston***

Of course, the number and extent of revisions necessary will depend on the nature of the text itself and the translator's own working methods.

3. Study the source culture

Whether you are translating literature

about the contemporary world or the historical past, you will want to know as much as you can about the source culture. Works that are set in or refer to the historical past may well require significant library research on the events and artifacts of previous times. Even literature set in the present assumes a context, be it historical or artistic, of which the translator should be aware. You might find it useful to add books about your source culture's history, politics, art, religion, and literature to your reading list.

If you are working with a living language, you will want to stay in close touch with the area or areas where the language is spoken. Travel is often the best way to do this. When you're in another country, read the newspaper, sit in cafés, go to the theater—immerse yourself in that language and the world it inhabits. At home, you can watch foreign films and cable news, and read foreign periodicals. Many foreign newspapers and periodicals are now available on-line, which makes them especially easy to find. Listen to foreign music, study the foreign culture's visual arts, politics, history, and religion, befriend immigrants from the source culture. A literary translator translates a culture, not just a language.

I can't sufficiently stress the importance of cultural knowledge. In the case of my language—Polish—certain linguistic expressions took on a life of their own under communism, and now are often used ironically in contemporary texts. Such expressions are crucial in understanding the contemporary texts. Likewise, especially in a culture like Polish that is very conscious of itself and its past, newer writers are continually referring back to characters and events from Polish history; not to know these is to miss the point of many texts. —

Bill Johnston

4. Collaborate

Translation is inherently collaborative—between the author and the translator. Many translators find other kinds of collaboration, be it with writers, native informants, or other translators, useful when they are starting out.

I think it is extremely useful for the beginning translator to work with another translator. The beginner who has a literary command of the target language will benefit from working with a native speaker of the original language and vice versa. The two translators can begin as co-translators signing both names to the finished

translation; later, each translator can help the other with the revision of a draft. As an editor, I have seen translations that sounded wonderful but were not indeed accurate and also translations that were completely accurate but wooden. Generally, poets and fiction writers have a better sense of contemporary literary diction, which is essential in the creation of a literary translation, and therefore they make the best partners for the language expert. These two sets of expertise are essential, and these two kinds of beginning translators can teach each other. — Mary Crow

Collaboration can be an effective strategy for experienced translators as well. You may develop a working relationship with one person or a circle of colleagues. If you are generous and willing to help, others will likely return the favor.

When I was teaching elementary English, French, and Spanish at a junior college in Georgia in the early 1980s, it was sheer pleasure to receive comments and corrections on my verse translations of Old French fables from my friend and collaborator at the University of Arkansas, Raymond Eichmann. Raymond and I have now produced five books of verse translation together, with the credits

for the translations usually going to me, and for the notes and introductions, to him; but the collaboration is more complex and intimate than the credits suggest. I often revise his prose and even add a paragraph or two. He is a native speaker of French with a better mastery of Old French than mine, so I often ask him to go over difficult passages with me, and I depend on him to catch my errors. Although I'm the official translator, he often gives me just the right phrase in English, one I wouldn't have thought of on my own. —John DuVal

A translator might collaborate closely with a native speaker of the source language on an ongoing basis.

After I have worked with the poet, asking all my questions with great minuteness and tenacity, I type up a penultimate version with the help of a brilliant, wonderful native-language informant and good friend, Clara Pires. She is both linguistically and humanly deep and sharp. She catches everything, not only errors in understanding, but even weaknesses in tone or register. I wonder if I would dare publish a book without knowing she had carefully read through the entire text. —Alexis Levitin

Or a native speaker may be enlisted to

help on a specific project.

People who love literature and language are usually delighted to help in a translation, and such helpful friends rarely get the credit as collaborators that they deserve. One of my warmest translation memories is poet, native speaker of Italian, and translator Rina Ferrarelli's gift of a whole afternoon in 1991, going over with me my translations of each of the fifty sonnets of Cesare Pascarella's The Discovery of America, with no compensation for herself other than a mention in my Acknowledgments and the pleasure of sharing in the labor of translating poetry.—John DuVal

Collaboration can be the foundation of some translations. There is a time-honored tradition of poets translating poetry from languages which they themselves either do not know at all or do not know well enough to translate without assistance.

The translations here were all done from a prose pony (or preferably several prose ponies to break down habits of phrasing) or with scholars and friends native to the original language. —W.D. Snodgrass, in the preface to his Selected Translations, a Harold Morton Landon prize-winner

Some of our best and most influential translations have been produced in this way. Among the many well-known contemporary English-language poets who have translated collaboratively from languages they did not know are Ted Hughes, Robert Pinsky, W.H. Auden, Stanley Kunitz, and Richard Wilbur. Needless to say, this type of collaboration requires exceptional literary skill in order to succeed, and it is not suited for the translation of prose.

Criteria for Literary Translation

In the excitement of choosing a translation project and creating a translation of your own, you can easily lose sight of the larger picture. It's easy to get caught up in tracking down the precise usage of an idiom or trying to tell a typo from a pun. Somewhere in the back of your mind, however, you should be thinking continually about your overall goals.

Points of view on what those goals might be have changed over time, and they vary from translator to translator, sometimes significantly, but there are a few givens.

- A literary translation should stand on its own as a discrete

work of literature of which the translator is the author.

- A translation will necessarily differ from the original. It too is an original work, a primary document.
- There is no such thing as a definitive translation; multiple translators of a single work will produce multiple and—at least theoretically—valid translations.

Lexical meaning is only a beginning in literary translation:

Even the most intellectual poets have an allegiance to sound. That is why they are poets, not essayists or pure philosophers. — Alexis Levitin

Translation is “literary” when it assumes the complex interaction of meaning and form.

Developing Translation Skills

No matter how well translators know both their own languages and their source language(s), and no matter how well they write, most of them can benefit from additional formal and informal training:

- Informal workshops in which participants discuss various aspects of liter-

ary translation. Increasingly, members of both ALTA and ATA (American Translators Association) are establishing informal groups or local chapters, which hold meetings and sponsor workshops, speakers, and other programs. Watch for announcements of their meetings in your local newspaper and for announcements of other events about translation, writing, and related topics.

- Workshops offered by universities and writing programs, which may not lead to a degree but do offer an opportunity for in-depth projects.

- A degree program leading to an MFA or an MA in translation. Several universities now offer advanced degrees in translation. Not all of them focus solely on literary translation, but most of them include at least a course or two related to literature. For an extensive list of departments, programs, and courses of literary translation in the United States, Canada, Puerto Rico, and the U.K., check the ALTA website (www.literarytranslators.org), under Literary Translation Programs.

- A degree program leading to an MFA in creative writing. Even if these programs do not include courses in literary translation, they will help you improve your writing skills and increase your knowledge of literary forms and genres.

- A degree program in English-language literature, the literature of your source language, or comparative literature.

There is also benefit to learning as much as you can about publishing, even taking courses in publishing or editing. If nothing else, such courses will clarify for you where translation fits into the book industry puzzle. They will also help you understand how an editor works, how books are chosen for publication, and how contracts are written. Often these courses use book editors as lecturers, and a personal connection to an editor you meet through such a course may help you place your work. Attending events sponsored by publishers' organizations can be a good way to learn more about the publishing process and to meet editors. For more information on publishing and translation—and what to do when it comes time to look for a publisher or to market work you have published—read “ALTA Guides to Literary Translation: Breaking into Print,” “The Proposal for a Book-Length Translation,” and/or “Promoting Your Literary Translation.” (All are available on the ALTA website, www.literarytranslators.org.)

The Literary Community

As a translator, you are a part of the broader literary community. Colleagues, as well as cultural and professional organizations, can play a significant role in your professional life if you take the necessary initiative.

Hundreds of translators submit to our magazine each year, but I have met many more translators at conferences than I have through the magazine, because so much of the journal's work is conducted over the Internet. When an editor or publisher asks me to recommend a translator, I think through the entire pool of translators whose work I know well, but I am much more likely, ultimately, to offer the name of someone I have met under professional circumstances than someone whose name I know only through submission to the magazine or by reputation. I think I can speak for most editors when I say that I prefer to work with translators whom I know (preferably through personal experience) to be not only masters of their art but also professional and reasonable people.
— **Olivia E. Sears**, Editor, *Two Lines*

Your first contacts with the literary community may well be with people in your source culture who share your

interest in literature. They may be poets and writers, students, or local translators who will value your opinions about the literatures you know. They may also help you to meet writers who need to have their work translated or put you in touch with friends who need translators. Try to meet as well the editors and literati of your source culture, whether in their country of origin or, for example—in the case of a visiting writer or a writer in exile—in the United States. These relationships work both ways; the people you meet will teach you about their cultures and act as informants, and you will be able to return the favor.

On the other hand, you may first encounter other writers and translators working in English. This can be a vitally important ingredient in your life as a translator. It is your colleagues who will help you sort through thorny passages and provide feedback. Finding a colleague whose opinion you respect and establishing a relationship that allows you to trade work and provide constructive criticism for one another can be one of the most rewarding aspects of a life in literary translation. You may find a kindred spirit in a local translators' group or on an Internet discussion list, but you will no doubt find it worthwhile

to venture further afield, too.

Consider joining national and international organizations of literary translators and attending their conferences. The American Literary Translators Association, for example, holds an annual conference each fall that provides many opportunities for newly fledged translators to participate. Conference information is posted on the ALTA website. Other organizations offer worthwhile workshops and meetings at various times as well. The Calendar of Literary Translation on the ALTA website (www.literary-translators.org) lists many of these events and provides links to many organizations.

Technology and the Literary Translator

The desk of the literary translator looks very different today from the way it looked even ten years ago, and you will want to consider which resources—hardware, software, and on-line—might help you enhance your work as a translator. Today's computers, software, and Internet equip and support the work of literary translation in many ways that might not be immediately obvious.

*On a recent trip to St. Petersburg, I purchased an electronic Russian-English-Russian dictionary that offers the capability of adding and editing entries. This means that I can keep track of how I translated key expressions in an individual work and I can enter my research results. For my work with nineteenth-century Russian literature, I've developed a working knowledge of the varieties of carriages used in the period. My barouche and calash are now safely recorded—and easily retrievable—in electronic form. — **Marian Schwartz***

Even if you don't have an interactive dictionary, you can set up a database on database software that may be pre-installed on your computer or included in another software package. You can keep that database open as you translate, which makes adding entries very convenient.

E-mail alone has enabled dialogue between translators and their (living) authors on a scale never before seen, not to mention rapid communication with publishers and literary agents halfway around the world. Perhaps even more significantly, the Internet is an invaluable resource for researching all types of information from cultural and linguistic to scientific and technical. You will soon find yourself accu-

mulating and using your bookmarks to complement the reference books on your shelves—and you'll discover information you never dreamed was accessible.

Progressing in the Profession

As you gain experience, you might consider not merely joining local and national organizations but volunteering in them and assuming leadership roles.

ALTA's annual conference offers opportunities for translators at all levels. You might give a bilingual reading or volunteer for an announced panel that is relevant to your own work. The conference organizer might welcome help in organizing the book exhibit or a special event. Maybe you have good Internet skills and could help with the organization's website. If you're relatively new to ALTA—or, indeed, any organization—it's incumbent upon you to make the first move. Tell an officer or board member that you're ready and willing.

You may also find that the activities of other professional organizations that work to promote literary translation—the ATA Literary Division and PEN, in

particular—are worth exploring. Each hosts events related to literary translation and is an access point to other literary translators and the world of literary translation. PEN's World in Translation Month is the occasion for readings by literary translators throughout the month of May, primarily in New York but elsewhere around the country, too.

Eventually, you will be ready to organize various kinds of translation-related activities, including bilingual readings, and even lead workshops, whether locally or on a national level.

Most experienced translators also devote at least some time to reviewing translations and even writing about various aspects of translation, from translation theory to the publishing process. It is important for translators to review each other's work; no one who hasn't actually translated can share the informed perspective that a working translator will have on a work in translation. For a thoughtful approach to reviewing literary translations, see PEN's Guidelines for Reviewers of Translated Books, available on both the PEN and ALTA websites.

At some point in your career, it will be time to return the many generous

favors you've received along the way. Once translators have several publications to their credit, it becomes their turn to serve as consultants or mentors to younger translators; their turn to serve in professional organizations, to increase public understanding of the translator's work, and to encourage interest in literature originally written in other languages.

References

General references in print and on-line:

ALTA Guides to Literary Translation: Breaking into Print; The Book-Length Translation Proposal; Promoting Your Literary Translation. Practical guides for the literary translator seeking publication. <http://www.literarytranslators.org>

The New York Public Library Desk Reference (4th Edition). Fargis, Paul, editor. Hyperion Books, 2002. 1016 pages. ISBN: 0786868465

The Babel Guides, published by Boulevard Books, London. Although neither exhaustive nor completely current, they give an overview of what literature has been published, a review

of the works, and some brief author bios. They can be particularly useful to a translator who is not sure whether a work in question has been translated or not, and if it has, by whom and when. Information is listed in previous ALTA guides.

PEN Handbook for Literary Translators

<http://www2.pen.org/translation/handbook.html>

The New York Public Library

Literature Companion. Anne Skillion, editor, and the Staff of the New York Public Library. Free Press, 2001. 784 pages. ISBN: 0684868903

The Translator's Home Companion.

On-line resources for translating including international news links, search engines and glossaries.

<http://www.lai.com/lai/companion.html>

Writer's Guide to Internet

Resources. Vicky Phillips and Cindy Yager. Arco Publishing, March 1998. ISBN: 0028618823.

News links (listings of newspapers by country and/or language):

Directory of Newspapers Worldwide

<http://www.cosmopolis.ch/medi->

[alinks.htm](#)

Ultimate Collection of News Links

<http://pppp.net/links/news/>

Radio Locator. Formerly the MIT list of radio stations on the Internet.

<http://www.radio-locator.com/>

Live-radio

<http://www.live-radio.net/info.shtml>

Literary translation organizations:

American Literary Translators

Association (ALTA). Providing services to literary translators from all languages and a professional forum for the exchange of ideas on the art and craft of translation. Website includes lists of translation programs, publishing opportunities, and calendar of literary translation.

<http://www.literarytranslators.org>

American Translators Association

(ATA). Including a Literary Translation Division.

<http://www.atanet.org/>

Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP). Publishes *The Writer's Chronicle*.

<http://www.awpwriter.org>

International Federation of

Translators/Fédération International des Traducteurs (FIT). Including a Literary Translation Committee.
<http://www.fit-ift.org/english/liter.html>

Literary Translators' Association of Canada/Association des traducteurs et traductrices littéraires du Canada (LTAC/ATTLC)
<http://www.attlc-ltac.org/>

PEN. Including a Translation Committee.
<http://www.pen.org>

Poets & Writers. Resources for creative writers. Publishes *Poets & Writers*.
<http://www.pw.org>

Publishing courses:

Center for Publishing, New York University
http://www.sce.nyu.edu/dyncon/publ/our_book.html

Columbia University, New York
<http://www.jrn.columbia.edu/publishing>

Emerson University, Boston ('writing and publishing')
<http://www.emerson.edu/acadepts/wlp/pages/UNDERINF.HTML>

<http://www.emerson.edu/acadepts/wlp/pages/GRADINF.HTML>

New York University, School of Continuing Education, New York
<http://www.scps.nyu.edu>

Pace University, New York
<http://www.pace.edu/dyson/mspub/bams.htm>

Stanford University
<http://www.stanfordalumni.org/mig/education/proed/professionalpublishing/ppc.html>

University of California, Berkeley (short professional courses)
<http://www.unex.berkeley.edu/unex/catt/publish.html>

University of Denver
<http://www.du.edu/pi>

University of Virginia, Charlottesville
<http://www.uvace.virginia.edu/cup/publishing>

Also check the continuing education programs in universities and colleges near you.

Editors and publishers associations such as the **Publishers Marketing Association**

(www.pma-online.org) and **Editorial Freelancers Association** (www.the-efa.org) also offer seminars and courses throughout the year.

The Guides can be downloaded from the ALTA website: www.literarytranslators.org.

Printed copies of the Guides may be ordered from the ALTA office:
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