

Anna Casassas

From the journal of a translator

Tuesday 19th

Today I have started on another book. How often have I turned the cover and looked at the first page to get an inkling of the climb ahead? I have mixed feelings. On the one hand, there is the excitement of starting something new and the hope of stumbling across a hidden treasure. On the other, there is sloth and a natural reluctance to chain myself to the desk yet again. I sigh deeply and count the number of pages I will have to battle through before reaching the end. The path looks a long one and I am tired even before translating the first word. However, I know that I will feel happier once I have a feel for the book so I grit my teeth and tackle the first words, which are always the most difficult.

The reason they are the hardest is because it takes time to “tune in” to the author. In this case, his name does not ring a bell and I have no idea what his writings are like. If the photo on the flyleaf is any guide, he looks dull and scruffy. Maybe he is just not photogenic. I am not exactly eager to make his acquaintance through the written word. A translator strikes up a kind of friendship with an author who hits the right chord. When that happens, it makes translation easier or, at the very least, pleasanter.

I once translated a book that I didn't like and which happened to be written by a woman. On another occasion, I did a book by another authoress and the work was a joy to read and translate. This kind of platonic friendship may seem a bit odd but when it happens it helps

El mundo es una cárcel (The world is a prison), Carmen Calvo (2004)
Mixed media, collage, photography, 22,5 x 17 cm

The first words of a novel are always the most difficult to translate, it takes time to “tune in” to the author

common. She played with the story and words and spoke of her memories of country life in a way that enthralled me. I did not dawdle. I simply made sure I accurately conveyed her vivid imagery. Her lively style won me over and time whizzed by.

Today’s book is a different kettle of fish. I have made a start but the author still leaves me cold. I have a sinking feeling that I will have no such luck this time round.

me no end. It not only makes for a better translation but it also means I have more fun right from the first page. It was hard to stop working on that book and the hours just flew by (not that the translation was easy, mind). Perhaps the fact that she was a woman and a lawyer (like myself) helped, even though we had nothing else in

Monday 25th

The brain is a mysterious thing. Maybe that is why the first few pages I translate are easier than what comes next. Whatever the reason, I get a lot more done if I start early in the morning – in fact I do almost half a whole day’s translation by late morning. I looked at the clock just a short while back and it was quarter past ten and I already had four pages under my belt. If I could keep this up for the rest of the day, I would have the job done in three weeks. That would be wonderful but it is no good trying to kid myself. From now until the evening, each word will have to be painfully dragged into place. Everything suddenly becomes harder. I get the feeling I am being choked by ambiguous wording, weird phrasing and rare expressions. I have to spend more time pondering over meaning and each paragraph takes an eternity.

It will take even longer if I spend time gazing out of the window but the day is fresh and sunny and I am dying to go out and play with the dogs, who are chewing a stick out on the grass.

In any case, I will not stop until I have hit my target number of pages for the day. Each day I note down which page in the book I have reached and how many I still have to translate. It is a dull task but I need to do it if I am to earn my crust.

Tuesday 26th

I am beginning to get the measure of this author and his taste for endlessly long sentences full of detail. He seems to take a perverse delight in finding somewhere to stuff all his favourite words. I cannot say it is unpleasant or boring but the author’s mind-bending obsession with detail means the book does not move on. It gives me the feeling that I am always stuck in the same place and that is very demoralising.

The author must be bonkers! His endless sentences are beyond a joke, I found some that are twenty lines long! It would be some consolation if they were beautifully written but they are not.

Just a while back he wrote the same sentence in six different ways, trying every combination and verb form imaginable in an attempt to tie things down. In the end, I did not know whether I had translated all the bits or left some out. I spent half an hour over this one sentence trying to hack through the verbiage. This chap is perfectly capable of rattling on for the next five pages without hitting a full stop. Just try explaining all this to a publisher to see whether he takes this into account when paying you. The fact is, I am worn out by today's work and I can no longer think straight. I will switch the computer off shortly and go to the cinema to give my brain a rest.

Wednesday 27th

I went to a book presentation yesterday. Maybe it sounds daft but I always look forward to these affairs because it is a kind of celebration of all the work that goes into a book that will be seen on the streets, read and spoken about.

Of course, they talk about the book, not about the translation (or perhaps I should say translations, because the work —like yesterday's one— is often translated into both Catalan and Spanish). Be that as it may, I am pleased they invited me. All too often, one hands in a translation never to hear any news of the book. Most publishers are pretty thick-skulled when it comes to dealing with translators.

I like to hear what they have to say about a book that I have spent so much time translating. It does not necessarily mean that I will agree. After all, it is one thing to skim through a book for a presentation and quite another to spend a couple of months combing through it word by word to render it elegant and meaningful in another tongue. Such radically different approaches must necessarily throw up very different visions of the book. That is not to say mine is necessarily better. Personally speaking, I need an overview because otherwise I risk missing the wood for the trees.

The presenter has a difficult task. His job is to speak well of the book and that makes an audience sceptical. Making personal comments about the author or translator is also risky (although the latter rarely gets even a mention).

Reading a bit of the Spanish translation set me wondering and I was chafing at the bit to run home and check it against the original.

The long and the short of it is they presented the book and I was pleased that I had translated it and liked the way it had turned out. It was hard to resist the temptation to buttonhole people and tell them to read the book and that the presenter had undersold it. However, the thrill of seeing a book published after all one's work soon wears off. I am once again in the thick of it and am dog-tired too. Burning the candle at both ends is no fun.

Most publishers are pretty thick-skulled when it comes to dealing with translators

Sunday 1st

I will not switch the computer on today because Sunday is a holiday and it is impossible to concentrate on work with other people wandering around the house and asking for things. Some friends are coming to lunch. One of them is fond of words so I will take the opportunity to go through my little list of questions on stock expressions that I am unfamiliar with and that crop up in the bit I have translated. I still have a few questions to answer for the previous book. We shall see if any changes are needed when they send me the galley proofs.

I suppose other translators have a circle of friends they can ask these kinds of things. I have not spoken to any but no doubt they take the same approach. That is because it is one thing to write one's own stuff as one pleases and quite another to translate what

someone else has written. In any event, I distinguish between friends who are that and nothing more and those who are good at thinking hard about a sentence before coming up with suggestions.

In the past, others would help me to find the solution, I'd put it into the translation and that was that. But now I often find myself dealing with the same problem over and over again, I've

I would be happy translating Victor Hugo, or authors like him.

A perfect original tends to flatter a translation

started drawing up various lists. The problem is how to come up with a system to make all this information easy to consult. So far, I haven't found any friends who can help with this.

I have several of these lists but my favourite one covers expressions. It may seem silly but you have no idea how much time one can waste trying to remember things like "to go as red as a beetroot", or "to cry like a baby" or "as blind as..." what? The fact is, translator don't get paid for thinking, only per line. So, after my Sunday dessert, I am going to see if I can sort a few things out.

Wednesday 4th

The other day I said it was easier to work in the morning but that is not so right now. I am surrounded by dictionaries. Anyone would think I was making a collection. However, there are words that are like wraiths, one never knows whether they really exist or are just the product of the author's fertile imagination. Even if I had another three stools piled high with dictionaries, there are words that just cannot be found. There is always the Internet but that is like looking for a needle in a haystack. There are many sources one can consult but there is no way of finding this damned word.

I began the day chatting on the telephone. I got butterflies in my stomach when I finally glanced at the clock. It is depressing to think that office workers get paid whether they are on the phone, at their desks or just sitting around for their computers to boot up. Unlike pen-pushers, translators are paid on a piecework basis.

Looking through the dictionaries made me see red because some of the definitions are really crappy and do not tell me what I need to know. Even so, I have had some fun because the old encyclopaedia that I picked up from my mother-in-law's home is full of amusing illustrations and definitions. There are days one just has to write off.

Thursday 5th

This book is a swine. I have just translated a page whose pointless, labyrinthine description makes me think the author wrote it with the aim of inflicting unnecessary suffering on the translator.

It is tempting to play censor and just cut the words out. To be honest, it would make no difference because the passage is meaningless.

Would that I could always translate good books. I would be happy translating Victor Hugo (or authors like him). His works might be difficult and take a long time to translate but the other side of the coin is that a perfect original tends to flatter a translation. With a book like that, I would make no alterations but rather tiptoe through the work as if walking through a cathedral.

What I am working on at the moment is more like eating tough beef fillet. I am fed up with chewing on winding, long-winded sentences. The author starts off talking about the hotel he stayed in and a few lines later he is describing the leaves of a tree in the garden of the house in which he spent his childhood. Obviously we do not share the same sensibilities. Even so, there is no denying the weird and wonderful things one learns along the way.

Monday 9th

I have been reading the pages to check that I understand everything and to tidy up some of the loose ends. I stare at the screen to make sure I have not overlooked anything and suddenly my eyes start smarting. My mind reels from so much concentration and from trying to rush things. I have no idea whether doctors have studied this syndrome but it is real enough. I have gone downstairs three times to take a break from the beast. The first was to do the dishes, the second was to hang out the washing and the third was to bring the washing in because it had started to rain. Hanging out the washing helped because I at last found the word I had been looking for. That is all well and good but I just want to finish this confounded book! Maybe I will like the next one better ||