I first became interested in translation while serving a mission in southern Spain in the early 90’s. The Church came out with a new Spanish translation of the Book of Mormon, and I would spend hours during language and scripture study reading the old and new versions side by side, considering the choices the different translators had made. When I got home from my mission, I started finding poems in Spanish and doing my own translations of them. If I could then find a published translation of the poem, I would compare my version to the other, deciding what I wanted and valued in a translation and trying to learn how I could do better.

On a trip back to Spain five years after the end of my mission, I found a book by the poet Rafael Pérez Estrada, fell in love with it, and decided to translate and publish it. I was eventually successful in doing so, and since then I’ve published several other book-length translations. I’ve also received several awards, including an Idaho Humanities Council fellowship and two fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts (the latest for 2015). My current project is a book of microfictions by the Argentinean author Ana María Shua (who I brought to BYU–Idaho to do a reading several years ago).

The following distillations constitute some of my current thoughts on literary translation. They stem from my practice, my study, and, to be frank, my own innate predilections and biases. While I believe that these are essentially true and, I hope, meaningful, they are not intended to be comprehensive or dogmatic but should rather be viewed as possibilities, provocations, goads toward productive thought and practice. Few if any of the ideas here are new; I’ve tried to credit sources for specific notions when necessary, and I apologize for any cryptomnesia on my part.

To translate is to write. Though translations are derivative works, a translator has written every word of a text that he or she has translated.

You never read a text more closely than when you translate it.

A good translation is not so much a reproduction as a re-creation, and, as a re-creation, a creation.

Translating a literary text is like writing that text but with the gift of having the hardest part already done for you.

Translation is an art of making choices. Unfortunately, most choices available to a translator are bad ones. Moreover, many choices that are good for one context (time, place, audience, etc.) will almost certainly be bad for a different one.
In translating poetry, a deep understanding of poetry is more important than a deep understanding of the source language. (A deep understanding of poetry in the target language would tend to presuppose a deep understanding of that language.)

Theory can and should inform a translator’s practice, but only unconsciously. The best translations are done by feel. A good translation is not so much a reproduction as a re-creation, and, as a re-creation, a creation.

In order for a translation to live, to be more than a type of literary zombie, it must be imbued with a spark or essence or living breath of its translator.

All translations are essentially hybrid texts, containing something of their original authors as well as their translators. Perhaps a translation should be wholly a product of its original author and wholly a product of its translator.

Even the simplest words don’t have exact equivalents among different languages (for example, “bread” (English) and “brot” (German) and “pain” (French) all connote different things). But the same is true of synonyms within a language. To paraphrase is to translate (though if you’re merely paraphrasing, you’re likely creating a bad translation).

Even the simplest words don’t have exact equivalents among different languages. But then again a word isn’t always (or perhaps ever) even equivalent to itself. Even “bread” will differ over time, from speaker to speaker and according to connotation and context and cultural embedding. In fact, each and every usage of a word is unique and places that word in a context that will cause it to mean something different, if only slightly, from that very word in every other instance. To play on Heraclitus, no one ever uses the same word twice. So why get upset if a word in an original text differs from the word used as its translation?

Even the simplest words don’t have exact equivalents among different languages. So think about what happens with complicated words that have a lot of baggage (like “freedom,” “God,” etc.). Even something as basic and unobtrusive as punctuation may require translation. A comma in Spanish is not merely or necessarily the same as a comma in English.

Even in the most faithful translations, some concepts, images, and tones may transmute into substantially different concepts, images, and tones.

Translation is revision. And, as Borges pointed out, to believe that every translation is inferior to its original would be to believe that every subsequent draft of a text must be inferior to its preceding draft.

It’s myopic to worry about or focus on what’s lost in translation. With good translation, there are always losses, but there are also always gains. It’s not a question of things being lost; it’s a question of things being transformed. To cite Jorge Drexler, everything transforms.

A literary translation should have a comparable density to its original. If there is a loaded or allusive word in the original whose target-language equivalent lacks the same connections or connotations, then the translator must load the translation so it has a comparable density of connections or connotations either at that point in the translation or elsewhere, even if that means the translation has to veer away from reproducing strict denotative meaning.

Discussion of things being lost in translation typically and naively presupposes a single source-language text as well as a single target-language text. Yet there is no single source- or target-language text nor a single reading of those texts. A text is already different for every source-language reader, just as a translation is always different for every target-language reader.

A good translation is just as dynamic as a good original. The best translations often function as acts of cultural transubstantiation.

Sometimes being overly faithful in reproducing an element of the original can cause the translation to be primarily or merely about that element (as with alliteration in Beowulf, for example).

Many texts have difficult and confusing passages. Why shouldn't many translations?

While good translation demands creativity, a translator is ultimately constrained by the connections that authors and readers are likely to make or accept.

Technical translation cannot tolerate ambiguity. Literary translation usually likes it.
A Jewish proverb holds that reading the scriptures in translation is like kissing a bride through her veil. I would counter that reading a good translation is like kissing the bride’s equally beautiful sister (with no interposing veil).

Most translations give the impression of having reached for something grand and come up short. So do most source texts.

Some translators seem to treat originals more like props than source texts, which is wrong.

Sometimes a translation fails because the translator, having a poor ear him- or herself, fails to trust the original writer’s ear.

A translator must always trust the original work and never try to outdo it. If Lorca wrote, simply, “dormían” (“they were sleeping”), a translator has no need to write “they were knocked out, catching some z’s.” If a translator thinks his or her ear is better than Lorca’s, what business does he or she have translating Lorca?

A translation should stretch the target language to at least the same extent as the original text stretched the source language (and probably more).

A translation should be a living, breathing text and not an artifact.

As Tolkien argued (yes, that Tolkien), a translation of an ancient text should bring that text to life for contemporary readers. How? By simultaneously trusting it and regrounding it in a contemporary idiom.

A translation succeeds when a translator with an ear for the original work and an ear for the target language forms a bridge between the two.

While the sense of an original text can be re-created (sometimes only laboriously), the sound of the original never can be, though it can be hinted at.

With a translation of a literary text, there’s no pressing reason why a word’s denotative meaning should outweigh its sound or other qualities.

As Walter Benjamin observed, a translator shouldn’t try to turn the source text into the target language, but rather turn the target language into the source language through the translation.

Benjamin also pointed out that, since a literary text’s primary purpose is seldom to transmit information, translation that is primarily concerned with meaning is likely to miss other, often more important, marks. Nevertheless, since words inherently transmit information, translators can never lose track of meaning.

The accuracy of a translation should be judged by its effect, not its strict fidelity to denotative meaning.

Translation offers possibilities of language, content, and form that we’re just not likely to get otherwise.

“Felicitous” may be a good word to employ when discussing a good translation. As may “grace.”

A translator should strive to create a work that the original author would recognize as and be happy to call his or her own.

Good translations embody Dieter Ram’s “Ten Principles for Good Design,” in that they are innovative, aesthetic, unobtrusive, honest, and durable; they make their source texts useful and help us understand them; they are consequent to the last detail; they are concerned with the environment; and they are often as little translation as possible.

The riddle (and perhaps miracle) of translation (and perhaps all communication): nothing quite adds up, yet somehow it can all add up (and sometimes add up very well). 🌟