



Forging the Self

Peter Cowley

Introduction

WRITING about her collection of short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies*, Jhumpa Lahiri makes the following observation.

[W]hether I write as an American of an Indian, about things American or Indian or otherwise, one thing remains constant: I translate, therefore I am.¹

She defines her own take on translation as “not only a finite linguistic act but an ongoing cultural one,” not necessarily just between cultures but within them as well. Her protagonists can variously be understood to perform different kinds of translation, even if it is only Mr Kapasi, the interpreter and tour-guide of the title story, who acts in the commonly understood role of mediator between languages.²

I take two questions from Lahiri. Firstly, when is a translator not a translator? And secondly, what is the relation between translation and selfhood?

However (leaving Mr Kapasi for another journey) I will take my answers from another set of texts. The present article is part of a project which takes as its object stories about translators. I mean by this any kind of text, fictional or documentary, in which translators and interpreters have a part to play.³

Here, I will consider three fictional texts, each of which has a translator-interpreter protagonist. I approached these texts with the burden of a hypothesis that wasn't really borne out by my readings. I brought to them the assumption, perhaps just the hope, that the translators in question would be figures of cultural knowing; performing cultural translation, as Lahiri might say. This assumption came from my earlier readings of language memoirs by Andrew Riemer, Alice Kaplan and Eva Hoffman, in which the metaphor of translation, as a practice and as a position one might occupy, mediated intercultural understanding, albeit in very different ways.⁴



In Andrew Riemer's *America with Subtitles* translation appears in the form of simplified subtitles to American films which his parents would watch in Czechoslovakia, and which would make the United States appear to them a paradise, such did the subtitles elide cultural differences.⁵ When the young Riemer and his family finally arrive in America, it is with no little consternation that they discover how inadequate the translations were, and how inadequate they would continue to be – even if they had been suspended in mid-air on Fifth Avenue – to the task of deciphering the rules and cultural practices of the new city.

Alice Kaplan's *French Lessons* also establishes translation as an inadequate metaphor for cultural belonging.⁶ She studies French at high school in America, goes to Switzerland as part of a high-school exchange and goes to Paris on tertiary exchange after graduating. Her story is one of the discovery of French as a place to hide from her origins, construct a new identity and leave behind her American one. But her story is also about discovering the impossibility of quarantining our various personal identities from one another, and that "living in translation", as she describes it, takes no account of cultural hybridity.

Cultural hybridity is the nub of Eva Hoffman's account of the immigrant experience. She too leaves Eastern Europe with her family when young (it is Poland, in this instance, and their destination is Canada). Like Riemer arriving in New York, she is baffled by the illegibility of her new home and the cultural practices she cannot understand. The title of her story, and its substance, is *Lost in Translation*.⁷ But unlike Kaplan, she figures translation as a useful position to occupy. Being an immigrant gives one a unique perspective, allows one to see what those born into a culture from which they are never uprooted frequently cannot, namely that all cultures are hybrid things, calling for constant translation, and that being lost in translation is precisely where you can begin to find yourself.

The work that the metaphor of translation does in each of these memoirs has less to do with subjectivity than the negotiation of cultural practices. The position that "translation" allows the authors to occupy is at the interstices of divergent cultural practices. This is hardly surprising. Mediation was ever the task of translation. But it is the way that the

genre of the language memoir inflects the metaphor of translation that is interesting.

Those three examples of the genre deploy translation as a metaphor for cultural mixity, cultural fixity, understanding and misunderstanding, and also to problematize the issue of cultural belonging. But that particular generic inflection is absent from the fictional texts I will consider here. This is all the more striking if we consider that the three language memoirs and the three pieces of fiction under consideration play on the same plot of connotative territory for “translation” and “translator,” namely the stereotype of the *traduttore-traditore*. Where does the translator belong? To two cultures at once? Or to neither? These questions derive from a long-established set of clichés about the translator-interpreter. The translator-interpreter belongs to neither culture, and is therefore untrustworthy, deceitful, and potentially treacherous. Or the translator-interpreter belongs to both cultures – a double agent – and is therefore equally untrustworthy.

My concern here will be to explore the generic inflections of translator figures in some contemporary fiction. This will by definition be a very limited sampling from the fictional genres available, and as such makes no claims to being anything more than a modest foray into new terrain. But it does demonstrate, at least by contrast with the language memoirs to which I referred above, what a difference a genre can make.

My three texts are from 1960, 1992 and 1994. The first is French, the second Spanish and the third from New Zealand, and in my retellings of each I will be emphasising the roles that the protagonists play as translators or interpreters. I will ask what function is given to the business of translating and interpreting; what job these figures do in the text, and what they do for it.

I

I begin with the short story “Jimmy”, by Françoise Mallet-Joris, which principally plays out the relationship between Jimmy and Olga, and Jimmy and Bravo.⁸ Jimmy, who is female, is a forty-something interpreter for a company of soldiers camped in a requisitioned chateau in occupied

territory while they all wait for orders to move out. Olga is a prostitute the company has collected at some point in their travels. Bravo is one of the men, and Jimmy's hunting companion.

Jimmy is said to be an interpreter – “officially”.⁹ But she does no actual translating or interpreting at any point in the story. She blends in with the soldiers of the company to which she is joined. Her body is “wrapped up like their own in a greasy uniform, spotted with mud and dirty oil”¹⁰ – they are all, in different ways, constrained and defined by their uniforms. She dresses like the men in the company, to the extent that they treat her as own of their own. That is to say, she passes for a man, although it is clear that everyone understands she is a woman. She has the voice of a man, except for a “slightly breaking note when she spoke about her mountains”¹¹: the voice cracks – a crack in her persona, presumably – whenever she recalls her origins. And she has the strength of a man, sometimes carrying Olga over her shoulders for hours during long marches.

Olga, on the other hand, is unambiguously female, and is described as a prostitute, wanton, “a gutter cat”¹² given to “howling like a cat on heat”.¹³ She also cooks for the men, and gratifies them too. She is sexually involved with Jimmy, whose sole occupation while they are stuck in the chateau is to monitor Olga's movements.¹⁴ They share a bed; Jimmy warns the men off her: “The first one of you who pesters Olga, I'll kill like a dog”.¹⁵ (The alignment of men with dogs and women with cats is not subtle.) If one of the men wants to corner Olga, the others will distract Jimmy, albeit guiltily. However, there comes the night when Olga, drunk, flirts too obviously with one of the men. Jimmy loses her cool and takes her belt to Olga. Then comes the breaking point. Olga shrieks:

It's not a rifle I need, you stupid cow, it's ...¹⁶

And in the ensuing struggle, which sees Olga scratching and biting like a cat, Jimmy's shirt is ripped open and her breasts exposed. Bravo leaps to the rescue, repairing the breach with one hand while holding Olga with the other – “by the scruff of the neck like a small cat”.¹⁷ Jimmy then drags Olga off to the bedroom, shoots her – which the assembled company politely ignores – and returns to the card game at hand. The body is disposed of the next morning in the nearby swamp. All of this

– the lesbianism, the murder, the disposal of the body – is very modestly implied in the text.

Why then is our protagonist billed as an interpreter? Let us assume that this is not merely coincidental, and not just padding for the story, and ask: what kind of interpreter is this? Why should it matter to the story that Jimmy be an interpreter, when she clearly does no actual translating or interpreting at any point? Jimmy clearly does not work between languages, but between genders. Or rather, not “between”, since Jimmy crosses no boundaries, and seems content to remain in one camp. In wartime, allegiances must be unambiguous, although in this story allegiance to gender is the only one that seems to matter. It is hardly surprising therefore that there is never any mention of the nationalities of the characters. In more than one sense, Jimmy is in occupied territory. She is the perfect translation; her source text, the body underneath the uniform, invisible, or at least wilfully ignored by her comrades who would prefer to turn a blind eye to questions of hybridity and gender games. Some might say that this also makes her a very bad interpreter, eclipsing and betraying her source rather than effacing herself as interpreters are meant to do. It would be more apposite, however, to point out that you cannot be translation and translator at one and the same time.

II

I move now to story number two – *A Heart So White* by Javier Marías.¹⁸ The narrator, Juan, is both a translator and interpreter at the United Nations and other high-level diplomatic meeting points. So is his wife, Luisa. They meet through their work, when they are both assigned to a meeting between a “high-ranking Spanish politician” and a “high-ranking British politician”, ostensibly Thatcher. Juan is to be the interpreter, and Luisa the “net”, in other words the back-up interpreter, or the one whose job is to monitor the performance of the primary interpreter. But this is hardly a meeting of great minds, and once the cameras have left the room and the civil servants have paired off with their counterparts to negotiate, the two great leaders are left to make awkward chit-chat. Out of boredom, Juan decides to intervene and liven things up. He intercepts their exchanges

and alters the responses of the one to the other, tacking on questions and musings, and leading the two politicians into a philosophical discussion in which the Thatcher character ends up rhapsodising about love. Luisa is at first shocked at the transgression, but says nothing, and finds herself bound to him in complicity.

The incident draws on the commonplace that interpreters are not to be trusted. The narrator concedes the reality of that unreliability, but counters with realism. Even with a supervising translator on hand,

[Y]ou'd need a third translator [...], who would, in turn, check the second translator and retranslate their words and perhaps a fourth to watch over the third and thus, I'm afraid, ad infinitum...¹⁹

And so a measure of trust is required so that business can carry on as usual and the world might continue to turn on its axis. Indeed, says the narrator,

[T]he truth is that the translations are the only fully functioning element in these organizations, which are, in fact, gripped by a veritable translatorial fever, somewhat morbid and unhealthy, for every word pronounced [...] and every scrap of paper sent [...].²⁰

And he later tells us that assembly members typically have *more* confidence in what they hear through their headphones than the unmediated pronouncements they hear. The translator-interpreter is firmly established as the cog without which the machine could not function, indispensable although fallible and even treacherous. This will be the primary permutation of the translator figure throughout the novel.

It can be related to the novel's framing device, a story about an inter-generational secret that needs to be told. Juan's father, Ranz, killed his first wife in order to marry his second. When he tells his second wife his appalling secret, she is so horrified that she kills herself. Ranz then marries her sister – and wisely says nothing. She will be Juan's mother, and down through the years only a few people will ever remember that Ranz was widowed not once, but twice before. That information comes out in tiny snippets, which Juan overhears, intercepts and starts to piece together. Eventually, it will be his wife Luisa who acts as intermediary, or interpreter, to draw the story out of her father-in-law at the very end

of the book while Juan listens, unnoticed, from the bedroom.

Remember that Luisa is an interpreter too. Does this mean she cannot be trusted, or merely that her intervention is required? For that matter, can we trust Juan's father? Both father *and* son are kinds of interpreters in the story. Indeed, the translator figures seem to be self-replicating. Here, in addition to the narrator, and his wife, the obvious other figure, we have the narrator's father, a not-so-obvious translator figure, and others besides. Let me explain.

Ranz, now retired, worked for many years at the Prado, assessing and authenticating paintings for the museum and for private collectors. But Ranz's opinion, albeit an expert one, is not always to be trusted. He made a career, and a small fortune, out of playing buyers off against sellers, and vice-versa; withholding information about paintings, gilding the truth a little, even authenticating forgeries. He is joined in this last transgression by his great friend, the painter Custardoy, a brilliant forger, guided in his copying by Ranz's expert eye. But Ranz's commerce with forgeries extends beyond his business dealings: we've already seen that he replaces his beloved second wife with her sister, who after her own (perfectly natural) death, joins her sister on a living room shelf, in portrait form. The portrait, needless to say, is painted by the forger Custardoy.

Like deceitful Ranz with his not entirely trustworthy interpreter son, Custardoy has a son – who also happens to be a forger. This is hardly surprising. The narrator tells us that

[H]e was one of those individuals who want to live several lives at once, to be many, not limited to being only themselves: people who are horrified at the idea of unity.²¹

Custardoy the Younger and Juan are about the same age – they grew up together – and it is Custardoy the Younger who somewhat maliciously tempts Juan with information about the first of the three women to marry Ranz.²² He has no first-hand knowledge of her, of course, only what he knows from his own father, who in turn only knows what Ranz has told him. Degrees of information passed from forger to forger to forger. Something else has to happen in order to bring about the narrative closure that Juan seeks, and that Custardoy the Younger clearly yearns for. The

latter has no identity of his own, no story of his own – just his copies, which are the only things that earn him any money.²³ His own paintings never sell. So he passes along bits of Ranz's story, ostensibly by accident, but perhaps out of a desire for closure.²⁴

This is where the translator comes into play. People demand translation, even rely on the translator to underwrite a channel of communication. Juan needs his wife to act as interpreter between himself and his father in order to close his father's story. Unlike the translator figure in Jimmy, the figures in the *Marías* novel are both visible and functioning. They are also contrasted. The forger Custardoy, who survives on the sale of his copies but can neither sell an original nor settle down to being "only himself", is clearly opposed to the narrator Juan who, like Luisa, begins to abandon the vagabond work of interpreting in order to settle into a kind of permanence, a new home with his new wife, a new, shared story and a sense of optimism about the nagging question his father puts to him: "what now?" This new-found permanence, and the sense of self it brings, coincides with the closure of his father's story and a new beginning for his own. Indeed, selfhood in this story is linked to narration; to the ability to move forward and have a story of one's own, distinct from the recycled stories of others. That moment, for Juan, is aligned with the gradual giving up of interpreting. *Can you be a translator and a translation at the same time?* It is at this point that my third and final text intercepts us.

III

In Translation, by Annamarie Jagose, recounts the love triangle that Helena falls into when she moves to Wellington, into her aunt's house, temporarily empty while her aunt travels the world.²⁵ Her neighbours are Navaz Nicholson, a renowned translator of literature from a variety of languages (including Russian, French and Japanese), and Navaz' lover Lillian, a cross-dressing performance artist.

In her first act of translation, Helena (who is not a translator, but a bank teller, and therefore experienced in other kinds of transactions) remaps her aunt's house. She empties the front rooms of all their furniture, decants it into the back rooms, rolls up the carpets and remakes the portions of

the house she wishes to inhabit in the image of a redesigned Californian bungalow she finds in a recent issue of *Architecture: International Forum*. The bungalow now embodies “zen precepts”, disturbing the boundaries between inside and outside. All the rooms are “poised” between “inward view” and “outward sweep”. Helena’s remake of her aunt’s house marks the beginning of a process of transformation: she now occupies a liminal space.

When she eventually moves in with Navaz and Lillian, she enters into a complicated love triangle. At first, she sleeps alone, while Navaz and Lillian preserve their coupledness in the next room. After some time, she joins Navaz in bed, and it is Lillian’s turn, not only to occupy the single bed but also to begin wearing Helena’s clothes. Aware that this triangle could reconfigure itself at any moment and wanting to preserve her own relationship with Navaz and keep Lillian on the outer, Helena buys two plane tickets to India so that she and Navaz can visit the latter’s family, leaving Lillian behind to work on her upcoming photographic exhibition, “Same-Difference”. More liminality.

It is in India that Helena gets down to the real business of translation. When Navaz wishes to return home to Wellington, and to Lillian, Helena cannot bring herself to leave, and finds herself alone in their tiny temporary apartment. And so she begins to translate. Navaz had been receiving regular instalments of a new novel by Nishimura, a great Japanese novelist. Navaz is his translator of choice. No doubt because her translations “never looked like translations”.²⁶

*There is no sign that these words belong to someone other than that dissident whose name is displayed so prominently on the front cover, that the author may not even understand the language he claims to have written. There is nothing to suggest that these lines are less real than those unseen and unintelligible ones, choked up with unpronounceable consonant clusters, from which they derive.*²⁷

Navaz is completely self-effacing, the perfect translator. But in the case of Nishimura, she is so much more (or is it less?) than that. She is so good that Nishimura feels she completes him. The blurb from the back of her last translation reads:

“I always knew Navaz Nicholson to be a fine translator but her work on

my latest novel far exceeds that of translation. Nicholson does not return my work to me, she rewrites it entirely. Skin Behind Bone is a new novel and I will say an altogether better novel than anything I have ever written [...] From now on, the first appearance of my work will be in Nicholson's translation."²⁸

And when Helena wonders what will happen to the original Japanese text of the new novel, Navaz explains that it will come out in a few years time, as a translation of the English. In one sense, Navaz is no translator at all. Or we might say that, like Jimmy, she has reinvented herself through translation. This is the role that Helena will take over, through interception.

It is this new novel by Nishimura that Navaz has been translating when she leaves Helena behind in India. It arrives daily in their post box, one perfect page at a time, and it will be Helena's responsibility to forward it back to Navaz in Wellington. But Helena does more than forward the pages. Wanting to keep up with Nishimura's story, which she has been following for weeks at Navaz' side – a story about a love triangle, naturally – and equally unable to move beyond her separation from Navaz, she takes to steaming open the envelopes, and then to retyping the text before sending it on. She adds, erases, alters, and when the final page comes, with its ambiguous ending, she continues the story and completes it to her satisfaction, bravely cannibalising the writer's style for phrasing and vocabulary, which she supplements with her phrasebook and dictionary, and then submits to Professor Mody, a retired Reader in Japanese literature, who goes over the work and corrects it.

Helena's interception allows her to emulate Navaz, who had already, through translation, transcended the secondary role of translator. When Helena decides the time has come to conclude her own version of Nishimura's novel, which Navaz is "translating" further down the line, Helena can finally move on. She enters a new relationship, of sorts, which mirrors the resolution of the love triangle in the Nishimura novel, and at that moment can no longer even remember Navaz. Helena's translation is at an end – she has rewritten herself.



IV

In Jagose's and Mariás' novels, the translator mediates, intercepts, and maintains a channel of communication.

My letters to Navaz always seemed to hold open a passage between us, a passage which did not depend on her realising who had written them or even the certain knowledge that they had been received.²⁹

And in each novel there is also – beyond the translator figure who acts as a third or go-between effecting a relation between two people, texts or spaces – another third, who monitors and guarantees the relation of thirdness between the translator figure and the two texts, or spaces, that that figure brings into relation.

Helena physically intercepts the instalments of Nishimura's novel and rewrites them – is she translator or author? – before sending them along to Navaz. Professor Mody monitors the rewriting.

Juan interprets-intercepts the conversation of the two great leaders, distorting their messages as his future wife Luisa listens, silently, complicit. And Ranz authenticates the forgeries of his friend Custardoy. As Juan says, to guarantee the validity of any translation

[Y]ou'd need a third translator [...], who would, in turn, check the second translator and retranslate their words and perhaps a fourth to watch over the third and thus, I'm afraid, ad infinitum...³⁰

This brings me full circle, back to Jimmy. When her breasts are revealed in the struggle with Olga, it is Bravo who intervenes to cover it up, assisting Jimmy in her rewriting of her self, covering all traces of between-ness, hybridity or origin. It is Bravo's job to be the third man, authenticating Jimmy's translation by signing off on the forgery.³¹ "Ah!" says Bravo at the end of the story, when it is time to break camp and Jimmy helps herself to the remaining valuables in the chateau – "You're a real man".³² It is no coincidence that the only element of the story that might be linked to the mundane business of translation concerns the destruction of dictionaries in the chateau's library.

The general lived with his greyhound in the library. He was always to be found reading. The dog would sharpen his claws on some dictionary or other.³³

Is this a metaphor of gender confusion? The dog, aligned with the



male characters within the story, works his way through the library's dictionaries with the distinctly cat-like gesture of claw-sharpening, as if to burn any bridges between the spaces Jimmy has traversed, or perhaps just to forget them.

CONCLUSION

We should be wary of profiling the fictional translator figure from the analysis of these or any number of texts. The outcome is easy to imagine: a lowest common denominator of shared attributes, and a circular definition. My interest in these figures goes rather to the strategic uses to which they are put, and by extension the different ways they are used in different genres.

In these three texts we find fictional translator figures who exist less in terms of inherent characteristics than within a certain structure of relationality. Furthermore, that relationality is not one of simple betweenness, but a mobile structure in which the role of translator can be displaced in order to mediate subjectivity and enable narrative positions.

More significantly, they all reject the account, often adopted in language memoirs, of translation as a useful position to occupy: useful for its hybridity and perspective, useful for the power it confers to read cultural practices, and difficult to abandon. Instead, the role of translator is one to be occupied tactically, then relinquished, in the interests of both narrative closure and what we might loosely term "selfhood". I take this distinction – between the figuring of translation in these three fictional texts and its figuring in the three autobiographical accounts mentioned earlier – to be one of generic uptake.

I dare say that in other texts the generic uptakes, and the tactical uses to which translator figures are put, will be quite different. But I leave that for another reading.

NOTES

- 1 Lahiri, Jhumpa, "Biculture shock", in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, (June 2-3, 2001), Spectrum pp. 8-9 (p. 9).
- 2 Lahiri, Jhumpa, *Interpreter of Maladies* (London: Flamingo, 2000).
- 3 At this stage in my project I will not discriminate between translators and interpreters, although they clearly do very different jobs in different professional domains.

- 4 Cowley, Peter, "Lost and found: the language of exile", in *Traduire le vécu. Mots Pluriels*. (March 2003).
- 5 Riemer, Andrew, *America with subtitles* (Melbourne: Minerva, 1995).
- 6 Kaplan, Alice, *French Lessons: A Memoir* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1994).
- 7 Hoffman, Eva. *Lost in Translation* (London: Minerva, 1991).
- 8 Mallet-Joris, Françoise, "Jimmy", in *French Short Stories, vol. 2*, edited by Simon Lee (London: Penguin, 1972), pp. 126-139. I have, on occasion, slightly modified Diana Saville's translation of the original French.
- 9 Mallet-Joris, "Jimmy", p. 127.
- 10 Mallet-Joris, "Jimmy", p. 129.
- 11 Mallet-Joris, "Jimmy", p. 127.
- 12 Mallet-Joris, "Jimmy", p. 127.
- 13 Mallet-Joris, "Jimmy", p. 135.
- 14 Mallet-Joris, "Jimmy", p. 126.
- 15 Mallet-Joris, "Jimmy", p. 128 – translation modified.
- 16 Mallet-Joris, "Jimmy", p. 137 – translation modified.
- 17 Mallet-Joris, "Jimmy", p. 139.
- 18 Marías, Javier, *A Heart So White* (London: The Harvill Press, 1995).
- 19 Marías, *A Heart So White*, p. 54.
- 20 Marías, *A Heart So White*, p. 49.
- 21 Marías, *A Heart So White*, p. 116.
- 22 Marías, *A Heart So White*, p. 116.
- 23 Marías, *A Heart So White*, p. 117.
- 24 As he sits facing Juan, tempting him with fragments of Ranz's story, he flicks his lighter on and off in a gesture which directly recalls the Prado guard in one of the stories within the story, a reminiscence of Ranz's time working in the museum. In the story, Ranz discovers the poor guard one evening, while he (Ranz) is making his rounds of the museum at closing time, as he always does, to check that everything is in order. For all his deceptions, he's terribly concerned with protecting originals. His finds the old guard, who has worked there a lifetime, standing in front of a Rembrandt – the only *authenticated* Rembrandt in the Prado – playing at the edge of the frame with the flame from his lighter. It is a painting which depicts a scene in progress and to which various interpretations have been attached. But the guard is determined to destroy it, because he can no longer bear *not to know* what happens next. Ranz only talks him out of it by agreeing with him, and moving to destroy the painting himself. Only then do the guard's instincts kick in: he knows that the authentic masterpiece must be preserved. The situation defused, Ranz doesn't denounce him, but merely moves him to a room of palinschematic paintings – paintings which illustrate a *complete* story.
- 25 Jagose, Annamarie, *In Translation* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1995).
- 26 Jagose, *In Translation*, p. 47.
- 27 Jagose, *In Translation*, p. 48.
- 28 Jagose, *In Translation*, p. 49.
- 29 Jagose, *In Translation*, p. 190.
- 30 Marías, *A Heart So White*, p. 54.
- 31 I use "forgery" merely to trace the connecting threads between the stories. The question of the relation of translation to gender politics and identity is of course a far more complex one, which I will take up in more detail elsewhere.
- 32 Mallet-Joris, "Jimmy", p. 139.
- 33 Mallet-Joris, "Jimmy", p. 128.