Lost – and Found – in Translation: 
A Memoir of Hard Work

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According to educator and literary critic Joel Spingarn (1875–1939), there are three requisites for being a translator: courage, courage, and courage. Certainly, translation is not for the faint of heart, if only because nowhere else, apart from academia, is one’s learning, or woeful lack thereof, subject to such perpetual and insinuating scrutiny. To be a translator is to ride a piebald horse called Rising Panic across the occasional plains of straightforward grammar, over the barricades of paronomasia and unintended solecisms, through the dark miasma of technical jargon and bureaucratic doublespeak, and around the pitfalls of assuming without checking — all beneath the lowering sky of the Swiftly Approaching Deadline. There is much peril, but for those who take up the call, there is likely no more fruitful course.

I began translating in college, when we were asked to put a passage from *The Peloponnesian War* into English. The wild recklessness of the exercise hooked me. What right had I, an untutored upstart, to take the immortal words of Thucydides and transfer them, pell-mell, into another tongue? The thrill was as intense as it was illicit, and was deepened by the magical element by which words written in a language and a time wholly removed from my own were somehow, through some strange alchemy, converted into a new coin current in a new realm. By this intoxicating magic, translation draws in so many of her victims — I mean, her devotees. It is also what keeps them working at a task that so many others shun.

The first paid translation work I did was for a colleague who asked me to translate her friend’s master’s thesis abstract from Korean into English. I was no expert in the Korean language, but I pressed my shaky Korean skills into service and found that, quite apart from the demands of understanding the text, the main challenge lay in grasping the context and background. For a translator working broadly across manifold disciplines and for someone just starting in the field, the necessity of keeping body and soul together almost always trumps the luxury of disdainfully declining a particular job as “outside my bailiwick.” The background research involves a great deal
more legwork and clock time than does the rendering of the text, in which way translating again reminds me of academia, wherein the actual writing of an article or lecture is really the culmination of a very long process of almost wholly self-directed research. For example, the abstract that I was asked to translate was on criminal justice, a subject with which I am, fortunately, not very familiar. In order to make sure that the mode of translation – the tone, the tenor, the vocabulary, the approach – conformed to the original, I had to study current publications in the criminal justice field. Outside reading is almost always helpful; a lifetime of intimacy with books and magazines of all persuasions, from the mechanical and practical to the theoretical and esoteric, is the roux that forms the basis of the translator's stew.

Later, I found myself in Japan, where I took my first full-time translating job at a plant in Ibaraki Prefecture that made laser printers. My job was to translate from Japanese into English every last document in my section that had to do with the manufacturing of laser printers. These documents were to be shared with the company's other plants in the United States and elsewhere in the world. Again, the actual "carrying across" (as the word "translation" means in its original Latin) of ideas from the vessel of one language to the vessel of another took up only a small percentage of my time; the vast majority of my day, both at my desk at work and on the train to and from the factory, not to mention propped up in bed each night, was taken up with study, study such as I had never experienced during my undergraduate and graduate years. I learned the Japanese for "solder" and "jig" and "thermocouple," while grappling with the everlasting "-teki" and "-ka" and "-jiō." I also learned about static electricity, the history of the integrated circuit, the manufacture of capacitors and lasers and gears, the intricacies of distribution and international customs laws, the differences between export treaties between Japan and Vietnam and Japan and Thailand, the state of labor relations in Brazil, the method of managerial selection in India, the finer points of product liability law, the origins of the man-hour unit, the background of mass production and factory management in the United States and Japan, the correctly deferential way to address one's boss, the politics of the workplace in a foreign country, and how to conduct every nook and cranny of my life, from the mundane to the overarching, in Japanese. The language was the lynchpin, and everything hinged upon my ability to understand and then to explain difficult concepts in a foreign tongue. I studied with every free minute I had, knowing that my mistakes would not pass unnoticed. Without a net, we translators take ideas from one place and attempt to deliver them, intact, on a lonely trapeze.

After a year at the company, I had finished translating the mass of documents about laser printers. I set up on my own as a full-time freelance translator. This is when my real education began. No longer sheltered by
the company, I was taking on jobs involving an even wider range of subject matter: theoretical mathematics, chemistry, nuclear engineering, Buddhism, history, political science, advertising, marketing, and finance. Odd subject matter that seemed not even to fit under the heading of "miscellaneous" was sometimes the order of the day: metal-smithery, yogurt culture, a horse-drawn carriage used by the Japanese imperial family, beekeeping, concrete and gravel mixing, irate letters written to miscreant dive instructors, sad letters written by cuckolded husbands to their wives' former beaus. After a few months of this, I could honestly answer "yes" when a client asked if I had experience translating materials having to do with the construction of foreign-funded electrical grids in Southeast Asia.

The amount of background work involved in full-time freelance translation is extraordinary. In this sense, translation work and academic teaching are similar. Academics submit their work to peer-reviewed journals, where the wolves are only too eager to snatch from the jaws of solid scholarship any scraps left unprotected by well-researched footnotes. Translators, too, stray into extemporaneous ad libbing at their grave peril; everything must be reviewed and fact-checked and language-checked and generally confirmed. If "publish or perish" is the iron law of the university, so too translators must produce an endless stream of words or face prompt and certain unemployment. Perhaps the only substantial difference between scholarly translation and university teaching is the interaction that professors have with students. It was not until I was invited to be a guest lecturer on academic and literary translation at a university in Tokyo last year that I realized how sorely this crucial social component of the scholar's life is missed in applied linguistics — lost, as it were, in translation. This disparity notwithstanding, I would contend that scholarly translation and scholarly research are mirror images of one another. Edward Seidensticker wrote in *Genji Days*, the diary he kept while translating Lady Murasaki Shikibu's *Genji Monogatari*, that getting lost in one's subject, the utter absorption in one's work, is the real stuff of research. This holds true, I think, for scholarly translation and academic research alike.