

The languages of exile

James Kelly reports on a stimulating event that focused on the translation of modern and contemporary Hispanic literature, in theory and in practice

Perhaps one of the most promising things about the Languages of Exile one-day conference, held at the University of Westminster in June, was that the mix of speakers – practising authors and translators, alongside publishers and academics – suggested that the content would go beyond the realm of academic and theoretical deliberations to touch on practical matters relating to literary translation and the publishing industry.

The theme of exile was broadly

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interpreted by the participants, who included former director of the British Centre for Literary Translation Peter Bush, the keynote speaker. His discussion of his translation of Juan Goytisolo's *Juan sin tierra* (*Juan the Landless*) considered the challenges of translating the non-standard elements of the self-imposed exile's prose. Looser interpretations included the Spanish poet Francisco Brines's notion that as we go through our lives we are continuously exiled from younger versions of ourselves.

However, perhaps one of the most interesting themes to arise – and one that ran throughout the presentations – was the relationship, and at times tension, between author, translator, publisher and editor. This was first raised by Peter Bush, whose refusal

to domesticate Goytisolo's work for an English-speaking readership ultimately led to the replacement of the editor responsible for the project.

The theme was then taken up by Tom Boll. His eloquent discussion of the process behind Harriet de Onis's English translation of Cuban author Alejo Carpentier's *Los pasos perdidos* (*The Lost Steps*) focused on archived correspondence between the author, the translator and the editor, Herbert Weinstock. Boll explored the problems of translating the Latin American baroque into English, unearthing correspondence that showed Carpentier's initial complicity in changes such as paring down the work's baroque descriptions and breaking up its long paragraphs, which Weinstock argued would 'militate against the acceptance of the book' among Anglophone readers and hence affect sales. Boll went on to explain how Carpentier came to regret authorising these changes, protesting that the decision to break up the paragraphs destroyed the complex interplay between present-past-present, one of the central features of his prose over which he had laboured long and hard.

It was observed that at the time of this translation (1956), these decisions were largely symptomatic of the poor visibility and lack of authority of the translator. Gregory Rabassa and Suzanne Jill Levine were cited as examples of how translators have successfully managed to improve this situation, and if Boll's presentation has served to highlight this historical iniquity, the afternoon session provided an opportunity to see just how much the dynamic has changed.



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Telling stories

Rosalind Harvey's account of her translation of Mexican author Juan Pablo Villalobos's short novel *Fiesta en la madriguera* (*Down the Rabbit Hole*) provided an excellent example of the autonomy now afforded to translators. Harvey discussed the challenges of dealing with the presence of Nahuatl, an indigenous language spoken in Mexico, and words specific to Mexican Spanish, providing examples via a reading from her translation.

She was joined on stage by Stefan Tobler, founder of And Other Stories, an emerging publisher of translated fiction. Tobler's venture, which has attracted considerable attention, was born of frustration at a tendency among major commercial publishers to shy away from literary fiction and seek to reaffirm readers' existing preconceptions of countries and cultures. In his presentation, Tobler outlined a refreshing approach which seeks to put literary merit before sales prospects and consciously attempts to avoid the temptation to focus on novels and authors with a proven record in terms of sales. Supported by UK-wide reading groups, the grassroots social enterprise has published a number of titles by promising contemporary authors such as Juan Pablo Villalobos (Mexico), Iosi Havilio (Argentina), Carlos Gamberro (Argentina) and Juan Tomás Ávila Laurel (Equatorial Guinea).

A number of sessions focused on poetry. There was a telephone interview with Francisco Brines (Spain), a bilingual poetry reading by Álvaro Fierro (Spain), who was joined by his two translators, Steven Cranfield and Claudio Tedesco for an on-stage discussion, and a round table on translating the obscure poetry of Peruvian poet César Vallejos.

All in all, this was a stimulating event that provided fascinating insights into the world of literary translation at all its levels.

Resources from the conference are available at <http://languagesofexile.wordpress.com>.