

Pour le 25ème anniversaire de l'École de Traducteurs et Interprètes de Beirut

Just as one talks about love, or war, and there is always more to say, so we discuss translation. It is important, after all. Translation lies in the taboo zone where stable knowledges overlap and uncertainty is always in the cards. We discuss because we are unsure, and because there is something to gain: cooperation between cultures. Translation is important.

Here, those who see clearly see badly. Blurred vision gives the most exact representation, the most definite focus, the pact with uncertainty, the desire to bet and proceed. Only the end is clear: cooperation between cultures. The rest are means. Those who are within, partakers of the trade, know this. For those who are without, for those who use and pay for our services, the tools of our trade might as well be crystalline clarities. Those without have traditionally had little reason to know better.

Our differences are thus a secret conversation, within the midnight blue of our professions, feverishly whispered in obscure publications, in specialized classes across the globe. The interior of translation is a special place, like the within of love, or of war. It is the blurred means by which we might yet reach a clear end.

The Spanish government of the late nineteenth century, wanting to control Morocco, could not have its translators and interpreters trained there. The translator who knows your enemy might be their translator as well. In search of neutrality, Madrid sent its trainees to Beirut, to a place of the profession. There, of course, the trainees' Arabic craft was forged, in a melting-pot of cultures, and they gained confidence, if not absolute competence. Those intermediaries would later learn well enough the peculiarities of Moroccan Arabic. More important, it seemed, was the need to have the training done elsewhere. Beirut has long been a major elsewhere, within the profession, in the intimate space of our secrets.

So what are the tasks, now that the old boundaries have fallen, now that capital flows everywhere faster than our feet? Yes, to see that we have this special place, within the overlaps of cultures, where we can talk, where we can seek out the best ways to help cultures cooperate. And then, as a profession, we must speak to the outside in ways that assist our work, helping us to gain and merit trust. We must speak more, much more, about the ends, and accept a diversity of means.