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An Interview with Peter Constantine

1. How did you get into translation?

The first book project I worked on in the late 1980s, *Japanese Street Slang*, was also my first encounter with translation; the Japanese economic miracle had led to a heightened interest in every aspect of the Japanese language, but there were very few language and grammar books at the time that went beyond the formal and polite forms of Japanese. My book was meant to be an antidote to that, a lighthearted project that presented colloquial language of different social groups in Japanese and in English, the natural speech of Tokyo teens, hipsters, drug traffickers, sex-trade workers. My transition to translating literary works was quite a surprise, but thinking back I realize that language in all its forms and the challenges of translating was what interested me most in my work with Japanese slang. While I was still working on my Japanese projects, I had come upon six stories by Thomas Mann that had not been translated into English. That was my first book-length literary translation. It quickly became clear to me that literary translation was what I wanted to do in life. As these Thomas Mann stories were unknown there was a lot of fanfare when the book came out, and this of course made it easier for me to launch into new translation projects.

2. What is it about translation that interests you the most?

In my view, a translation is the closest possible reading of a text: I think that regardless of how often you read a literary work, or how deeply you study it, you will never be able to experience it as intimately as you will if you set out to translate it. The translator has to weigh every word and every punctuation mark, has to look between the lines for the author's overt and not so overt intentions. This is a particularly fascinating process when you translate writers who are great literary stylists, such as Chekhov, Machiavelli, or Augustine. Reading between their lines is what interests me the most; that, and trying to recreate their timing and cadences in my English version.

3. Where do you see Translation Studies heading in the future?

I come from a generation that saw translation studies develop from a slighted and ignored field to a vibrant discipline in academe. The great turning point came in 2009 when Catherine Porter, then President of the Modern Language Association, chose "The Tasks of Translation in the Global Context" as the theme of the Presidential Forum at the MLA Annual Convention. In our history, in literary translation, there is a "before 2009" and an "after 2009." Before the 2009 convention, for instance, academics in the humanities in the United States and Britain would avoid listing translations on their CVs out of fear that they would be perceived as being academically unsound. On an academic CV, translations of full-length books were thought to indicate a problematic, even reckless, amount of time spent on a "non-scholarly" activity. In this there has been a marked change, and in the United States

and in England, new undergraduate and graduate programs are being set up. There is a great upward trend in the professionalization of translation studies, and by extension of translation itself. Particularly remarkable is the rise of literary translation as an academic field.

4. What role do you think technology plays in Translation Studies?

I think translation technology plays a very important role at this point. It is vital in translation studies to make every effort to keep up with the fast-changing field, as international companies now seem to keep moving to different systems at a faster pace. In this sense, educators specializing in translation technology must strive to keep up with the industry and keep connected to it, so that students can be prepared to embark on a professional career with the right tools. From my own perspective as a literary translator, however, computer-assisted translation or terminology management systems don't seem (as yet) to tie in with literary translation. I cannot see this technology offering the kind of linguistic support that the literary translator needs. It is interesting, though, to see the technology being used by specialists who are translating medieval and ancient texts, where repetition or slightly varied repetition is an important feature of the prose. The recent Italian translation of the Babylonian Talmud was a fascinating example of this, in which Traduco, a specially designed collaborative computer-assisted app, was used by a host of translators, specialists, and editors working together. I am not sure that the human factor can ever be ruled out.

5. How important do you think it is for a scholar to be a practitioner and vice versa?

From my perspective as a literary translator, I would say that translators are scholars. Translators spend much time, and should, thinking through and studying their craft. If, however, by "scholar" one means "theorist," then I'd say that there seem to be two factions in literary translation: those who lean more toward theory, and those who lean more toward practice. So though a scholar should be a practitioner and a practitioner should be a scholar, literary translation is, as Flannery O'Connor said about art, "a virtue of the practical intellect."

5+1. What are you currently working on in terms of research or translation project?

I am currently translating a book of very funny Chekhov stories. I'm also working on an article in which I examine how translation was used in South Africa in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by Afrikaans language activists to help codify and standardize Afrikaans, which well into the twentieth century was considered a substandard, pidginized Dutch. It took Afrikaans translations of the Greek classics and Shakespeare to prove to South African society at large that Afrikaans was not a rough "vernacular," but that when it came to sophisticated expression it could stand shoulder to shoulder with any world language. I am also working on literary translations from one of the autochthonous languages of Greece, Arberishte. Unfortunately Arberishte is a dying language with mainly "terminal speakers" like myself, who can understand it, and to an extent converse in it, but who will not be able to pass it on to a next generation. My Uncle, Yorgos Soukoulis, wrote a poignant poem about our dying language called "Language of Stone," which I translated for *World Literature Today*:

https://www.worldliteraturetoday.org/2014/september/audio-recording-language-stone-yorgos-soukoulis

Peter Constantine is a literary translator and editor, and the director of the Literary Translation Program at the University of Connecticut. His recent translations, published by Random House (Modern Library), include *The Essential Writings of Rousseau*, *The Essential Writings of Machiavelli*, and works by Tolstoy, Gogol, and Voltaire. His translation of the complete works of Isaac Babel received the Koret Jewish Literature Award and a National Jewish Book Award citation. He co-edited *A Century of Greek Poetry: 1900-2000*, and the anthology *The Greek Poets: Homer to the Present*, which W.W. Norton published in 2010. A Guggenheim Fellow, he was awarded the PEN Translation Prize for *Six Early Stories* by Thomas Mann, and the National Translation Award for *The Undiscovered Chekhov.* Peter Constantine has been a fellow at the Cullman Center for Scholars and Writers at The New York Public Library and a Berlin Prize Fellow at the American Academy in Berlin.