**Globally Speaking**

**Episode 056**

**Sympathy for the Traitor:**

**The Art of Literary Translation (Part One)**

MS I’m Michael Stevens

R And I’m Renato Beninatto.

MS And today on Globally Speaking, we’re going to look at translation from a different perspective than we have in any other episode.

R That’s true, Michael. And we’re actually not going to have one episode. This conversation was so good that we decided that we’re going to have two episodes in a row, and you’re not going to have to wait two weeks to listen to the second part of our conversation with Mark Polizzotti.

MS Wow. So we think this is so good that people aren’t going to want to wait two weeks—that they’re going to listen again next week.

R But let me tell you why it’s so good. So, Mark, as you were going to say, is a translator. He has translated literary works from French into English—over 30 books. But he wrote a book called “Sympathy for the Traitor,” which is the name of this episode. And I just happened to bump into a review of his book on *The Guardian*, and I couldn’t wait to download it on Kindle and eat it up. And I shared it with you.

MS You shared it with me, and I tore through this book. He looks at some ancient arguments related to translation; it’s captivating. It’s humorous, extremely intellectual. And I think our listeners will appreciate the conversation we had with Mark and the book itself.

R It was a little bit of an adventure to find him, but he’s here. So why don’t we let him introduce himself, and let’s hear the conversation that we had with Mark.

MP I'm Mark Polizzotti. I'm a professional translator, a publisher with the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and also a writer. I've been a translator for about 40 years, a publisher for about 30 years, and a writer for just about the same amount of time. What I love about all three of them is that they feed my book nerdiness in every single way. The other great thing about it is that every single one of those came about completely by accident, which I'm convinced is the only way to do things in life.

R Well, that drives me into the first question. How did you become a translator? It's usually by chance. What's your story?

MP My story is that I started learning French when I was in junior high school, mostly because there really wasn't much of a choice in my school. We had French or Spanish, and I sort of tossed a coin. Turned out French. At first, it didn't really appeal to me all that much, but then at a certain point, it occurred to me that if I actually put some effort into it, I might actually learn a foreign language that I could do something with. So, I started getting a little more serious about it.

The other part was that when I was a kid, my uncle who had been in the Army had been to Paris. I just remember him one day saying, completely apropos of nothing that I could remember, that Paris was a dirty city. I remember thinking, “That sounds great. I want to go there.” We had this dirty city that I could go to and we had this language that I was studying that would allow me to get there. So when I was 17, I went over for the first time and spent the year between high school and college in Paris.

MS So, Mark, just so we can have our French-speaking audience, and especially those in Paris, who listen to this podcast continue listening to us, did you find the city to be dirty like your uncle told you?

MP Well, Paris had these wonderful smells. I remember that my art teacher—before I went over, who I was very close to—my high school art teacher, who was also a great lover of Paris, said, “Oh, you're going to love it. It has these wonderful smells.” This is absolutely true. You begin to realize that, coming out of the Northeast of the United States, you're living in this kind of sanitized world, in a funny kind of way. Suddenly, it felt like life was just seeping up through the streets, through the asphalt, through the ... you know, in the air, in this wonderful way. It wasn't at all unpleasant. It was wonderful.

MP So, maybe that's what my uncle meant as a dirty city, but to me, it was life. It was aroma. It was fragrance. It was vibrancy. I, needless to say, completely fell in love with it, and have gone back and lived there several times since, and wouldn't change that for the world. Of course, that was the place where I inadvertently started to translate.

R So did you start translating from English into French, from French into English? What was your journey?

MP French into English. So, what happened: I was taking these courses, literature courses at the university. The professor, who I'd gotten to know a little bit, had invited this novelist who was on the syllabus. The novelist had written this very experimental 1970s sort of post-choice *Finnegans Wake* type of novel. So reading it before the class, I'm sitting there. It had word games and puns and little pictograms, all kinds. It was totally nuts. I'm reading this thing, thinking this would be insane to try to translate. So anyhow, the course came, the author came; he gave his spiel.

And afterward, I was standing with the professor for a second and he said, “You know, I have a car. I can drop you off in town today,” because he knew I lived fairly far away from campus, and I said, “Fine.” He said, “But Maurice, the novelist, I also have to drop him off.” So I suddenly found myself at 17, in the car with this published author who was about 50 years old, who knew all of the great intellectual stars of the time and hung out with them all. I was sort of sweating bullets, thinking “My God, here's this real author.” We stopped on the way for a coffee. Then Maurice, Maurice Collins, the author's name, liked his Whiskey. He's sitting there with his Whiskey, and I've got my little tea. I'm sitting across from this guy, and I'm thinking I have to say something because I'm going to look like a total idiot if I don't. The only thing I could think to say was, “How interesting it would be to translate your book.”

MS Oh wow.

MP Of course, I had no idea what I was doing. I had no idea how to do it. I had no intention of doing it. It was just one of those conversation starters. I figured he would just kind of let it go.

But in fact, his head snapped up, and he sort of said, “Great idea. Why don't you do it?” That was it. I was like, “Okay.” We got back into the car. We get into town. I tell the professor, “You can drop me here at the nearest metro.” Maurice turns around and says, and “No, no, no. We're having a dinner party at the house. Why don't you come along?” Okay. So we go to his house, and there are all of his friends, who included all these people I'd been reading in college. Celeste was there, and Roland Barthes was there, and all these sort of great literary stars hanging out in his living room, eating fried chicken. I remember that. He kept coming back during the course of the evening, saying, “You going to do it? You going to translate the book? You going to translate the book?” I said, “Sure."

MS You had to say yes at that point.

MP You had to say yes at that point, right? So I had six more months of my stay in Paris, and I dutifully went home, and I started working on it. He and I would get together periodically and check out the new pages. He'd give me pointers. In fact, my initial instinct about this book was absolutely right, which is that it was completely untranslatable, and of course, I did this terrible, terrible job. From that point on, there was no turning back. Maurice and I actually became friends and remained friends until he died 20 years later. I ended up, in fact, translating his first novel, which was much more approachable. I was able to do a better job at that point and that was published.

MS Wow.

MP That was my start.

MS I love the element of, while the translation may have been a failure, the actual project itself was a complete success, because you had recognized the challenges, and you were able to start thinking about the limits of translation itself.

MP Oh, it was full of limits, I can tell you that much. But then I started university the year after that. During that time, I actually was able to take some translation courses and stuff. There was this wonderful seminar with a poet and translator named Rika Lesser, who really got me to start thinking about translation, not as something that you do on a whim, but as something real. A real pursuit, and a real literary pursuit. At that point, it started to fall in place and started to make a little bit more sense. Ever since then, I've been very lucky in the sense that I've known people who have asked me to do translations for them. Little by little, you build a portfolio.

R So your book is called *Sympathy for the Traitor*. Of course, you're playing on the words of the *traduttore, traditore* (translator, traitor) that are in many schools of thought, from ‘translation is impossible,’ to ‘true translation is impossible,’ to ‘translation is freedom,’ and all kinds of positions in between. In your book, you discuss a lot of this: the translator as a co-author, as another writer. How did you get to that point?

MP Well, I realize, of course, that that's not a view that everyone's going to share, but I start from the proposition that all writing is language. One could very reasonably object that “Who is this translator to think that he or she is an equal partner as a creative artist? It's really the writer who's the creative artist.” The writer has to make up not only the words, but has to make up the characters, the plot, the intention, the whole thing. That's all true, but that character, that plot, the dialogues are all conveyed through words, through language. The writer has to grapple with them in a particular way to bring whatever the intention is across. The translator basically has to work with the same kind of material. It's also language, and it's also grappling in a similar way with trying to understand what the writer is trying to convey, and then figuring out how to bring that across into another language, another culture, another readership.

So, what I'm really trying to get away from is a very old prejudice that goes back centuries and centuries that posits that the original is the thing to pay attention to. The translation is kind of the servant or the valet of literary work. Therefore, in a subordinate position, in theory or by nature, the translation will never be as good as the original. It will never really be a faithful representation of the original. Recently, I think that that's a very limited way of looking at translation.

R I love that you mentioned that, because I remember, I had a personal experience with Jorge Luis Borges.

MP Uh huh.

R I read a story by him, a short story in English, in college, and I loved the short story. And then I said, wow, this is great in English, it must be fantastic in Spanish. So, I looked for the book. I'm talking about the late 70s, and when you don't have the internet, and you can't buy the book on Amazon, you have to look--

MP Mm-hmm (affirmative)--

R --in bookstores and try to find it. And I found the original book, and the original was worse.

MS Aw.

R I didn't feel the same connection with the Spanish original. And it's very interesting that you bring this point because that was before I became a professional translator; that was something that stuck with me. That sometimes the professional translation, the actual translation can be as good, or even better than, the original.

MP Well, you know Borges was a great fan of translation, and one of the things that he particularly liked about having his own work translated into English is that he felt it was leaner and meaner.

R Yes.

MP I've got a quote in the book where he's saying, “I'm embarrassed by my language; I'm embarrassed by how florid it is, you know, how Latinate it is. Make me tough and make me skinny and gaucho and macho.” Basically, he was saying, “Take what I'm trying to do that my own language does not have the resources to do fully in the way that I'd like it to happen, but English can.”

R The short story by the way--

MP The English translation will bring me closer.

R I just remembered the short story was “The Lottery of Babylon,” Which is a great--

MP Mm-hmm (affirmative)--yes.

R --short story. But Borges was an Anglophile, so this whole element, yes, Michael--

MS This ties into these two sort of guiding principles you have about translators. The first being that they are creative artists in and of themselves.

R Mm-hmm (affirmative)--

MS And in your book you have this great quote—because you're standing on some shoulders as you make this case, right?—from the Spanish translator Gregory Rabassa, saying that the ideal writer is a translator; all he has to do is write. Plot, theme, characters, and all of the other essentials have been provided. And I love this ending. So, he can just sit down and write.

MP Absolutely. I mean, Rabassa was not only one of the great translators, but one of the great advocates of translation, and someone who had incredible respect for his art. Of course, he worked with some of the greatest Spanish-language authors of his time. And we owe it to him, in the English-speaking world, to have brought us Garcia Marquez and so many of the other great works that have now become these touchstones of contemporary Latin American literature.

But he also recognized that the translator was a creative artist in his or her own right, and that when he translated a book, he was putting as much of himself into it as he was drawing out the original. And of course, there's that other great quote from him that I love, which is that when he was originally approached about the possibility of translating *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the question to him was, “Is your Spanish good enough?” and his answer was, “The real question is, is my English good enough?”

MS Yeah. Oh it's so good.

R Yeah, I once was at a book festival in Boston. And there was a session by Orhan Pamuk, a literature Nobel Prize winner from Turkey. And I had the chance to have a quick conversation with him and asked him, “How does it feel to be an author? You're an author in your language but most of your readers, to be universal, need to read you in translation.”

MP Right, right.

R And he said “I wouldn't be anybody without my translators.” And very seldom people realize this. I don't know, maybe you have a more updated statistic, but some years ago I read that in the United States, only three percent of all book sales are translations, while we go to other countries, like France and Spanish-speaking countries, where the consumption of translated literature is much, much higher. It's close to half of all the readings. And you being a translator here in the United States, why do you think that there is not more consumption for translation?

MP Well, I think it's a couple of reasons. To answer your question, the good news is that that three percent is creeping up, and creeping up to, I think these days, about five or six percent, so it's creeping up very, very slowly as people do become a little bit more aware of translation. I think it's a couple of things. I think for one, the writing industry, if you can call it that, in this country is extremely active. There's just so many books published in English to begin with that it's sort of hard to keep up. Just speaking as a publisher.

The other thing is that we are a fairly insular society, I think. Part of it has to do with geography. You've got this huge land mass, and on top we're skirted by another large country that is mostly English speaking, except for the French part. And to the south we have Mexico and Latin America.

But by and large, we're kind of surrounded by ourselves, which is very different from being these little nation states in Europe that for many years had to be extremely aware of all their neighbors just as a matter of survival. And because of that, you become a lot more conscious of what the other person's culture, the other person's language, the other person's way of living is. So, it doesn't surprise me that Europe, for example, would have a much more active interest in what's going on outside of its borders.

Of course, the other thing is, again, like it or not, the United States still exerts a huge fascination culturally on a number of countries, so a lot of what happens here that we just take for granted because it was written in English, it was published in the States, has to be translated into foreign languages in Europe, in France and in Spain and in Italy. But I think also that there is less product, home-grown product there, so they do rely a little bit more, in just publishing terms, on bringing in other--

R I imagine that there is not a lot of Icelandic literature, and they need to read the, they--

MP For example.

R The peoples that has the highest rating of reading, the highest consumption of literature, is Iceland.

MS This gets onto the topic, though, of translation being a bridge between cultures and nations, similar to travel, as people are exposed to other cultures. I think you talk about even the metaphor of translation ‘taking one holy relic from a place to another place.’

MP Well, that's what the word originally meant. Yeah. It was to bring a saint to heaven without the intervention of death. Essentially, the saint was translated to heaven, by sort of a holy ascension. And that was the original meaning of the word ‘translation.’ Then it became more of the shifting of, the ferrying of languages from one linguistic shore to another, essentially.

But you know, the notion of bridges and bridges of cultures is a tricky one because on one hand, of course, yes, there are all kinds of writing, expressions by all sorts of authors that, if you can't speak that language, if you can't read that language, you would never be able to appreciate were it not for translation. So there's that. But at the same time, we were talking about Icelandic or, let's say the “minority languages,” languages that are spoken by a comparatively small population in the world, generally speaking. Their words, their culture get out through translation. The flip side of that is that translation can also be an agent of extermination, because the more a culture depends on translation, the more language depends on translation to get out what it has to say, the more that language begins to atrophy and die. You see, for example, this happening with things like Celtic, Gaelic, and Catalan, which are still in existence. There are very fervent proponents of trying to keep the flame alive, but it’s getting to be harder and harder. It does become subsumed by the larger languages in the world.

R So, let me go into this other line of conversation. Every technical translator's dream is to translate literature, is to translate art. And they think that there is some glamor around it. Yet, I see that you actually don't make a living off of translation. How is this glamor of literary translation, what does it mean to you? Because that's your job.

MP It is my job. You're right, it's not my living; it's not my livelihood. There are people who do live as literary translators, and work all the time, and publish several books a year. I'm fortunate in the sense that I have another day job that allows me to be a little bit more picky about the work that I take on. It's only really a book that I'm interested in, and I really want to do, or feel a connection with. I'm not obliged to take something on just for the money.

MP As I think we were saying earlier, I would again be just a little bit cautious with that hard and fast distinction between glamorous literary translation and technical translation, because ultimately, it's all translation, and I think it's extremely important to try to get as much experience as you possibly can. For example, there was one time when I worked years ago on a huge database that had been brought in from Canada, and it was a machine translated database. It was supposed to befor a trademark company. Every single product, service, item, anything that you could possibly imagine, a noun, or a description attached to it, had to be listed for trademark reasons. So, what they had done is that they had given this to machine translation, and there was just columns and columns and columns of text, and on the side, our job as the editors of this translation were to basically read it and kind of refine it.

And we were just constantly coming across all sorts of totally wacky non sequiturs. The one that I remember that always made me laugh was, there was this one hardware store that was listing all of its products, and so you had nuts, bolts, widgets, and strawberries. And we said, “Strawberries, what the hell is that?” And what I realized was that the French word *fraise*, which means ‘strawberry’ but also means ‘drill bit,’ had of course been picked up by the computer as the first translation that it would think of, which was strawberries.

MS Uh-huh.

MP So, you've got all this hardware, and suddenly you're at a fruit stand, and this is where I thought, “maybe human translators are not superfluous quite yet.”

MS Yeah that can get you into some real taxonomy issues.

MP Oh yeah.

MS Not a lot of people searching for drill bits are happy to find strawberries in other cultures.

MP Exactly, or vice versa, I would think. Yeah.

**END OF CONVERSATION**