**Globally Speaking**

**Episode 057**

**Sympathy for the Traitor – PART II**

R I’m Renato Beninatto.

MS And I’m Michael Stevens.

R Today, we’re doing the second episode of “Sympathy for the Traitor,” our interview with Mark Polizzotti.

MS Last week we had just a fabulous conversation with Mark. His book was inspiring; both you and I devoured it. And I actually think, Renato, he is a kindred spirit.

R Well, all translators are born alike. We love language. We love words. And we do crazy stuff for translation, including not making any money.

MS Right.

R Let’s see what he has to say.

**TRANSITION MUSIC**

MP The question of fidelity, of course, is one of the great debates that has gone on in translation since the beginning of time, practically. You could say that it started off in Biblical times when St. Jerome decided to translate the Bible—not from the orthodox Greek, which is sort of the authoritative text for centuries before this. He decided to go back to the Hebrew original because he felt that the Greek translation, the Septuagint, wasn't a very good reading experience.

So, Jerome decided to go back to the original and produce a version in Latin, the Vulgate, which was meant to be not only much more accessible to the common person, because more people spoke Latin, but also was meant to reproduce what he called the beautiful body of the original style, to make it a pleasurable reading experience.

All well and good, except that his contemporary, fellow theologian St. Augustine, who was much more of, something more of a schoolmarm—I call him the J. Edgar Hoover of his time because he was very careful about lapses in orthodoxy—he got wind of this and reprimanded Jerome for departing from the Greek text that so far was being used in the churches, because he was afraid that this would cause some kind of a schism in the faith.

Now for him, this was all about preserving an orthodox message, so he was what we would now call a proponent of literal translation. Jerome was much more about creating a work of beauty, a work of literature from the beautiful original, so he was what we would call a stylistic translator. That question of, “What is fidelity?,” whether it's fidelity to the strict meaning of the original, or fidelity to the flavor and the style, is a debate that is inexhaustible. You can still have it today; people do. It's still one of the great raging debates in translation.

So, “beautifully unfaithful” is a reference to the French school of translation centuries later called *Les Belles Infidèles*, and what that referred to was a French style of translation which said that—and this is a completely sexist adage—it likened the translation to a woman in the sense that she can either be beautiful or faithful, but never both. So, what the French preferred to do was to take the translation and completely domesticate it, so that, for example, money became the French money at the time, honorifics became the French honorifics of the time, if you had a food that wasn't familiar, they would translate it into a food that was familiar to the French audience, and that was considered to be the way to translate well.

R You're just defining localization.

MP Well, that's exactly what it is. That's exactly right. And of course, in translation studies terms, that would be foreignization versus domestication. Localization is what some people would term as domestication, and in translation studies, that is actually kind of a dirty of word.

R Absolutely. Absolutely. The discussion here is how in the technical world, that is desired and expected, and in the literary world, that's actually despised because it takes away all the nature, or the author's intent, let's put it this way. And *Les Belles Infidèles*, they took away insults and they changed—if the character had, I don't know, if he was a drunk, they took away all these vices from characters. They made people look better and the stories look more appropriate. It sounds like the American approach now that we don't want to offend anybody.

MS Yeah, but then you get into the place of marketing translations or brand translations, and there is no true north, where they're caught between these two schools. Is that correct? Where they say, “We want to have the look and feel. We don't want to be vanilla,” yet there's no sort of reference point for it.

MP Well, I mean, again it really depends on who your audience is and what kind of translation it is. So if you're talking about marketing translation, for example, there is one of example I have in the book which I found very funny, which was an airline ad from Canada. There were two versions of it: there's the English-Canadian, and then there's the French-Canadian. In the English-Canadian one, there's this little story about Mr. and Mrs. Jackson who are going on a trip. He’s going on a business trip to seal an important deal, and she's happy because he hasn't left her behind for once.

MS We can all relate to that.

MP Right. In the French version, it’s Monsieur and Madame Gauthier who are going on some kind of unspecified business trip, and she's just happy to be with him. And the differences are subtle, but the way that these two versions kind of play out, you realize the cultural differences right there. Because on the one hand, you've got the practical Anglos: he's there to seal the deal, his wife generally gets left behind, but for once she sort of managed to get herself taken along. And then you have the romantic French who, you know, he's going on his business trip, but really they're there to just be together, and go on this nice voyage. It's not about language. It's about the entire way the story is couched, it's localized. It's to appeal to a particular audience in one culture or another one.

With literature, it really gets to be very tricky, because when you talk about the author's intent, my own answer to that would be that the author's intent is to convey a particular aura and a particular level of familiarity or disorientation or whatever it might be, but that works within the context of the culture within which that author is writing. So, the translator's job is to try to interpret that and recreate it or represent it in the other translation, which doesn't mean completely domesticating it or turning a François into a Frank; but it does mean making it intelligible in the same way that it would be intelligible to the original reader. So that's where the really tricky balance comes in, because you do want to preserve, I think, the idea that this is foreign, that the viewpoint is foreign, that this comes from another place, that it comes from a place that doesn't see things exactly the way that you see them, therefore it has something different to tell you. But you also don't want to make it seem strange and weird in a way that it wouldn't to the original reader, because I think that's not representing the author's intent. All you're doing there is kind of a self-conscious experience.

R So Mark, what inspired you? What drove you to write this book? Was it some kind of frustration with people not understanding you? We have this certain complex of inferiority among translators that believe that nobody talks about translation because people only talk about translation when it's bad. Nobody talks about an excellent translation. Was that in any way behind your initiative?

MP That was part of it. I think certainly, at least let's put it this way, there's a certain amount of misunderstanding, or lack of understanding, among people who don't practice translation—even those who read them. And I've noticed this over the years talking to people who are very smart, very well educated, very well read, but if you talk to them about translation, their initial assumption is essentially, ‘it's a game of equivalences’. Here’s the word in French, and you'll find the right word in English if you know what you're doing, not at all thinking that there are many potential right words, and it all depends on context, it depends on tone, it depends on a number of other things. As I say in the book, it's not a matter of taking one word and replacing it like a floor tile. There's a whole game of associations and other work that goes on to try to bring the translation across. So, that was part of it.

The other part of it is a frustration with the academic discourse of translation studies. And I say this on the one hand, delighted that there is such a thing as translation studies and that translation is becoming in academia a subject worthy of study, considered worthy of study, that it's no longer just a subset of literature linguistics. I think all of that is great, and I'm all for theory. I love theory. I love theory that makes me think differently about things. But, so much of what is theorized about and so much of the theoretical discourse seems to have very, very little to do with the actual practice of translation, and it strikes me that a lot of it really seems bent on trying to prove that it's impossible, or that it's a futile pursuit. I'm thinking, what's the point of that?

MS How do you bridge that gap though? Any thoughts on how to do that?

MP What I try to do in the book is bridge that gap by, first of all, talking about some of these things and disagreeing with some of it, but also, really by talking about translation as an action, as a practice, as something that one does and what that means. Whether it's my own experiences, whether it's experiences of other people, whether it's translators’ memoirs, whether it's looking at different translations and trying to figure out what the translators did in different instances to get to different places. It's really about what happens in the act of translation, and what does this mean, and sort of telling people that it's not an automatic process. You can see by taking a text and looking at five different translations, they're going to be vastly different.

MS Yeah, let's get the translators in academia reading your book and going and doing some translation projects.

MP Oh, they'll hate it.

MS Yeah, yeah, that'll be great.

R Well, Mark, one of the things that I like to say is that being invisible is not that bad, but people don't realize that whole belief systems are built around translations, and people don't even realize that God speaks to them through translators.

MP Absolutely.

R And you have this great story in the book about the original sin. That it's actually a mistranslation. Why don't you tell us about that?

MS Has the apple gotten the bad rap?

MP Is it an apple is the question!

So, this has to do with Jerome and his translation of the Bible, and it has to do with John Milton and Paradise Lost. What happens is that Jerome, in translating the tree of good and evil, which is *malum* (evil), translates it instead as *malus* (which is apple), and so the tree of good and evil becomes in the Vulgate the tree of apples. Now, flash forward centuries and centuries later; you've got John Milton writing Paradise Lost and, of course, like all good, educated, Christian Englishmen, he relied at that point on the Vulgate Latin Bible from Jerome. That's where his religious education came from. And so he starts off in the very beginning of the poem talking about the *fruit of that tree*, generic fruit. Later on, when you actually have him seeing the Garden of Eden with Eve biting the apple, he refers to it as an apple.

And the shift between the fruit and the apple really is dependent on a mistranslation, because the word in the Bible is a generic fruit, so we don't really know that in the Bible, this was meant to be an apple. It could be translated as any number of fruits, and in fact, as I pointed out on the Sistine ceiling, the man serpent encircling the tree in the Garden of Eden is encircling a fig tree, not an apple tree. So it really wasn't until the first representations shortly after Milton—you’ve got Dürer and you've got Cranach showing in the painting of Adam and Eve—suddenly they're standing under these bright red fruits, and at that point the apple becomes apple, and this becomes the fruit of Eve's sin. But who knows what would've happened if we hadn't had an apple, if we'd had a pomegranate instead.

MS Yeah. And in the world of sacred text translating, there's vastly different processes related to these. The New Testament, you have other examples of this, like one of the Pauline statements is, “I count everything lost” in English, and the original Greek actually says *skubala*, which is *feces*. He actually says, “I count everything shit.” And yet, no translator stood up over time and was willing to go to that vulgarity. There was some whitewashing there.

MP Well, there’s another one which is, again, Jerome, which I mentioned in the book, misread the Hebrew for *radiance* because, you know, he's talking about the radiance out of Moses' head. He misreads the word for radiance as *horns*. And so, his Moses has got these horns, and you think that's completely crazy, who would ever think of this? Or who'd ever believe that? But the fact is, Moses is represented in Christian art, European Christian art for centuries, as having these horns, including by Michelangelo, whose famous sculpture of Moses has got these two horns coming out. And where that becomes important, and not just a kind of an artistic anomaly, is that unfortunately it also leads to the stereotype of Jews having devil's horns, which just fed into this whole anti-Semitic trope. So, these mistranslations can actually have consequences.

MS That's fascinating. I think the Hebrew process of theologians sitting around and actually discussing translations and stories in context seemed to be, in my position, much more healthy than the way that the Christian theologians decided to sort of fight wars over what the source text was that you were writing from. The methodology—there seemed to be a little more community in ancient Hebrew, the conversation around it.

R Let's change topic a little bit. This brings me to mind the temporal aspect of translation, right? And how language evolves and changes over time, and you mentioned Milton. If we read Milton the way it was written, an eighth grader in Texas won't be able to understand half of what is written there. And now we have these translations that are updated to the language of the day, to what we're having here today.

I myself, I translated theater in the past, and I translated *Desire Under the Elms* by Eugene O'Neill into Portuguese, but I did the fourth translation of that play because it was a play. It had to be played in front of people, and the language needed to be the language of the mid-90s when I translated it. Probably, if somebody wants to enact that same play now in 2018, it will require a new translation. And when we go and start talking about religious texts, we're talking about texts that were written based on oral tradition 2,000 years ago or 1,000 years ago. Do you cover that in your analysis in the book, this updating of the language, and the need for new translations and new interpretations?

MP Absolutely. I mean, translation is a perishable product by nature, and so is all writing, and so is all literature. But if you're talking about a text that was written in the particular language, let's say Shakespeare, Shakespeare is getting harder and harder to that school child in Texas to be able to read.

And there are indeed editions of Shakespeare that sort of update the language and make it more accessible to contemporary readers, but the reality is we're still going to basically read Shakespeare as Shakespeare. We make allowances for the usages that have changed, and we might have little glossaries on the side to help us with some of the vocabulary that has changed meaning, but essentially it remains Shakespeare of his time. Translations of Shakespeare have dated and continue to be redone and redone and redone, because if you were a French translator today wanting to do Shakespeare, you're not going to make it sound like Elizabethan Shakespeare, or other Shakespeare of that period in French, because that would just sound absurd.

The converse example is somebody like Montaigne who has been translated many, many times over. Some of the original translations were by John Florio, and they're beautiful, but they're completely outdated; they would sound silly today. So, you have to keep redoing them because language changes, cultures change, and there's kind of a schism that starts happening between the original text and the translation as you move further forward in time. It becomes trickier and trickier to try to figure out how you preserve some of the qualities and some of the flavor of the older text that recedes further back into time, while at the same time making it accessible to readers of your own. There are various ways you could do it; one of the ways of doing it is to just completely ignore the chronological difference altogether, and just go straight for a contemporary idiom.

In theater in particular, I think that's one thing that gets done. I recently saw the production of *Antigone,* translated by Anne Cox, and it was completely modernized and used very contemporary anachronistic idioms very consciously. Of course it was not at all the “original experience,” but it was an experience that spoke to a theater-going audience of 2016 in a way that made sense if you're trying to preserve some of the effect that the original play would have had on the original audience at the time.

**END OF CONVERSATION**