

Translation Talk

Interviews conducted by students in the M.A. in Global Communication & Applied Translation program.
Spring 2020

Lisa Dillman

Lisa Dillman is a Professor of Pedagogy and the Director of the Honors Program in Spanish at Emory College. She holds two M.A. degrees - in Spanish Literature from Emory and in Literary Translation from Middlesex University in London, U.K. Dillman has published an impressive volume of work, ranging from novels to travel guides to scholarly texts. Her translation of “Signs Preceding to the End of the World” by Yuri Herrera won the Best Translated Books Award in 2016, and a review of her work on “The Transmigration of Bodies” by the same author appeared on NPR’s *Fresh Air*. She works with translation through both her teaching and in the many projects she continues to pursue.



Why did you decide to go into translation, and why translate Spanish literature?

The second part is easier to answer so I'll start with that: I went into Spanish literature because it was my major in college, at the University of California in San Diego, so that was what I was reading and what I loved. We had a terrific department and my professors – in particular Jorge Mariscal and Carlos Blanco Aguinaga – gave me a great love for Spanish literature. In my junior year I studied at the University of Barcelona for two semesters, and while there fell in love with the languages (Spanish and Catalan). I had marvelous professors, one of whom liked teaching colloquialisms to foreigners – so I would go around saying things like, “¡Vete a freír espárragos!” (“Go fry asparagus!” an insult that probably made me sound like a sixty-year-old). At any rate, translation seemed a natural extension. Returning to the U.S. I found that my experiences, jokes, and so on didn’t “translate” the way I wanted them to. Things that were hilarious to me in Spanish fell flat in English. So it turned into a challenge – and maybe obsession – for me.

Given your current job as a professor at Emory College, how much of your time is devoted to translation these days? Are you still taking on any projects?

I'm definitely still taking on projects. In fact, I just took on one this week, a really fascinating non-fiction work about a community of Peruvian Jews, written by Gabriela Machkovsky. And in June I'll hand in what I believe is my thirtieth novel, by Víctor del Árbol, which is a historical thriller set in Algeria, Madrid, Barcelona, and Malmö. Basically, I spend as much time as possible translating, which realistically turns out to be summer vacation, Christmas vacation, and spring break.

What is the most challenging aspect of translating Spanish literary works for you? Do you think that it is impossible to fully communicate the poetry of a work without its parent language?

It's really difficult to come up with the most challenging aspect, as I think *every* work is challenging, though not necessarily in the same ways. That may sound cliché but it's true. One category of challenges revolves around translating dialogue into English. Slang and colloquialisms are always complicated. Often, you think, "I know *exactly* what's being said, and I have *no clue* how to render it in English." What do you do when someone is speaking, for instance, working-class Madrid slang? Do you turn that into working-class New York slang? Is that a "fair" translation? And would my New York slang be good enough to be convincing and not sound forced or hokey? That sort of thing.

The question about whether it's possible to fully communicate the poetry of a work is one that I'd like to re-jig. Translation is always an act of interpretation; it's a privileged reading, done by someone who has likely read the text more times and more carefully than anyone except – maybe – the person who wrote it. And as an interpretation, it can be very poetic (or whatever other adjective you might apply to the source text). It's never going to be identical, that's just a non-starter. I think we need to reconceive people's view on what translation is and does and try to move away from what Lawrence Venuti calls "instrumentalist" readings which discuss translation in a rhetoric of loss, ways that the translated text didn't capture x or y element. My reading of the text is not going to be identical to anyone else's, which means that my translation isn't either. But I do think it can re-present the poetry, provided we understand that the poetry it represents is not "the" poetry of the source.

Can you tell me a little bit about your favorite translation project you've ever worked on?

I don't think I could possibly pick! I have loved many projects, often for very different reasons. I really love translating (good) noir, with fast-paced, hardboiled language. I love historical fiction that involves a lot of subject research, because I learn about things I would never have even thought about, like Algerian immigrants in Sweden, tuna fisheries in Mexico. And I also love books driven by tone, which may require little to no research but a huge effort to create what I feel to be an analogue in English, be that lyrical or sorrowful or philosophical. Does that sound like a cop-out?

Was it always a goal of yours to go into education, and translation followed along the way? Was it the other way around? Neither?

Neither! When I graduated college, I had no idea what to do with my life and spent years waitressing and traveling. I had already done a bit of translation (my undergraduate honors thesis) but I don't know if I thought of it as a career. Traveling got me even more interested in words. I remember driving through Central America with a friend after college and I kept notebooks with new words I learned: what word do they use for "mosquito"? What word do they use for "backpack"? And so on. I've always liked language, though, which is central to both translation and education (teaching Spanish, and writing, and translation).

What is a problem that surprised you the most when you first started translating?

I was very naïve about the practical side of things. Like the fact that you had to get permission to translate a text. When I was starting out, pre-email, that seemed somewhere between daunting and impossible.

One of your projects involved the translation of a novel, *The Mule* by Juan Eslava Galán, that was later adapted into film. Did you play any part in adapting it into movie format? Was the movie in Spanish or English?

I did not, aside from hearing that it was happening. It was in Spanish, so I don't think they needed my translation. But another book I translated has been made into a short film in English, in the U.K., and they used my translation for that, and there has been talk of a few others. The whole thing is all very NDA so I think I probably shouldn't talk about anything in detail, though.

Was there anything you wished you'd done differently when you first started out in translation?

I'm not sure. I can say that I wish there had been mentorship programs back then, but since there weren't, I don't know what else I could have done. Perhaps not get my heart broken, in literary terms, by falling in love with multiple books and having them be translated by other people. But maybe that was a necessary part of the process, too. In retrospect, I guess I don't regret it regardless of how painful it seemed at the time.

If you could translate anything in the world without worrying about time, money, or responsibilities in general, what would it be?

Easy! That would be my current obsession, Cristina Cerrada's *Europa*. It's a short novel, so time wouldn't be too much of an issue, and I am genuinely hoping it becomes a reality. Which means if any interested publishers read this, please contact me!

Do you have any advice for aspiring translators in literature?

I do: read voraciously. Read in English, in your other language/s and read translations. Find a short story (or two) that you love, and translate it. Contact the author as soon as you can to request permission. Have all of your friends and family read it and give you honest critique, and then send it out to journals. There are so many, both in print and digital, that publish translations, so the sooner you begin interacting the better. Also, try to attend as many events as possible: book launches, readings, signings. And attend the ALTA conference, where they have sessions for new translators as well as lots of events and workshops. ALTA is very welcoming to new translators.

This interview was conducted by Alysa Bradbury.