

Fall, Poppies, Forgetfulness, and the (re)Surgent Lives of Translations and Translators

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Interweaving life and translation, personal history and the history of translation, I aim to read the traces of writers' and translators' lives in translated poems. This is a lyrical essay that follows Nikolaous's (2006; 2008) hints of translation as an autobiographical exercise of reading. I shall explore the implications of the translator reading the work into his/her life, while the writer in turn incorporates reading into his or her (life-)writing. My stance will be that of the reader who becomes translator through the acquisition of a new language (German) from whose tradition certain poems were early imprinted in her memory – now re-surfing from the oblivion of habitual constructions into alien molds. This I will call "the poppy thesis": how literary translation loosens and sets aside memory, in order to revive experiences of language. I will use three poems as points of departure: "Herbsttag" (1902) and "Wir sind die Treibenden" (1922) by Rainer Maria Rilke, and "Corona" (1952) by Paul Celan. Their common traits are the passage and urgency of time, both personal and historical; their allusions to human introspection; the fall (taken as Autumn, and as a decline in age and the human cycle); and ambivalence towards brisk change or renewal. Inspired by the connection between Rilke's "Herbsttag" and Celan's "Corona" traced by Felstiner in "Repetition and Restitution" (1990), I will read both poems as simulations of middle age, and Rilke's latter one ("die Treibenden") as the turn of a whole age (organic symbolism waving at mechanic modernism). Simultaneously, collating prefaces, notes, paratexts by their Portuguese translators, I mean to digress on translation options (including my own) as storied readings. Literary translation, will be regarded not only as a hermeneutic process (Steiner), whereby polysemy and different remainders (Venuti) allow us to glimpse at the fractured poem of language, but also, as it were, a biological process. The versions of a poem, like poppies, erupt time and again from strata of language that yield life under odd circumstances of relatedness and oblivion.