Bank reports, school documents, legal briefs, contracts, newspaper articles, technical manuals, handwritten notebooks, and memoirs. These are part of the usual day-to-day work of a professional translator meeting the needs of the commercial market, with its deadlines and demanding agencies and generally poor communication with the author or other source of the text. I have been doing these things since 1967, but over the years I have had the opportunity to do a few nonfiction books, including two self-help books that were published in vanity presses and one history book on Argentina. Up until a few years ago, however, I had never done literary translation other than a few short book collections or stories.

One day in late 2004, I received an e-mail from Ruy Câmara, a Brazilian author who was seeking an English translator for his award-winning fictionalized biography, *Cantos de Outono*. He wondered if I knew someone who might be interested in the project. Because the man was from the part of Brazil that I know the best from my years in the Peace Corps, the Northeast, I replied that I might be that person, as an experienced translator and a connoisseur of his part of the world. He sent me a copy of the book and I started reading it, but was put off by the fact that it was nearly 500 pages long and had nothing to do with Brazil’s Northeast: it was a biography of French poet Isidore Ducasse, who was known by his pen name, the Comte de Lautréamont.

Eventually I tried translating the first 10 pages as an exercise in curiosity, but lost them in a computer crash before being able to share the results with the author, and was loathe
My purpose here is to give an account of my experience for anyone contemplating making a move into literature.
the original client. I also have found that some agencies are not very good about getting helpful information from their clients. This often means that the translator has to go to industry or actual client websites seeking terminology, descriptions of industrial processes, and perhaps other translations on the same topic.

In translating a literary work by a living author, there is the very real possibility of close contact with that author. In my case, I maintained e-mail contact with the author throughout the project, even using Skype, the Internet voice communication service. The author also helped me out greatly by sending copies of the e-mails he had exchanged with his French, Spanish, and Romanian translators to clarify the meaning of the text. I often sent him messages asking for clarification or questioning apparently contradictory text. We had the opportunity to meet personally for a couple of days in December 2006, during which time we were able to go over dozens of points, both big and small, in addition to the important personal acquaintance and friendship that we forged. I purposely avoided consulting existing translations of the work in Spanish and French, although they may have helped untangle questionable syntax and time references, but I wanted to avoid “contamination” from another translator’s interpretation.

Obviously, doing a job by a dead author would not afford the same opportunity, but in such cases there may be prior translations, or translations into other languages that can be very helpful, as well as other critical literature.

Psychological Approach to the Work: With literary translation, unlike most commercial work, one develops an important psychological relationship with the project, the subject of the book, and the author. One grows either to love the work or to despise it. As I worked, I grew to have a greater appreciation for the literary value of the book and of the subject of the biography. I eventually read substantial parts of the French poet’s works in translation.

Differences in the Act of Translation

As opposed to commercial translation work, as one sits and produces a literary translation, there are some notable differences in the actual translation process.

Commitment to Accuracy: In literary work, our commitment to accuracy, which is typically absolute and literal in legal and financial work, may be interpreted a little differently. Rather than being so closely attached to the idiom and specific expression of the original, we want to produce a work that will have the same overall effect from a slightly greater distance. In a legal contract, every comma can be crucial. In literary text, we have more freedom to restructure sentences and paragraphs and bring in idioms with equivalent impact, even though the images and metaphors may differ. In fact, we are often challenged to come up with such equivalences when nothing quite like the original will work. Nonetheless, the translator is strictly bound by the original work and is never free to “edit” it, even though he may be tempted. I occasionally found myself wanting to cut out sentences or even whole paragraphs because I thought the book would read better and make more sense that way.

Style: The translator has a second goal that goes hand-in-hand with accuracy, and which may sometimes seem to be in conflict with it: style. The translated work must read as if it has been written in the target language. Therefore, the translator must be ready to boot out and replace anything that sounds “foreign” or “strange.” Doing so may cause the translator to wander beyond the strict lexical meaning of the original into functionally and emotionally equivalent forms.

In terms of grammar, English will often allow the option of retaining an original structure, although not the most common one. For example, between Portuguese (or another Romance language) and English, the translator must constantly be on the lookout for the possibility of replacing the “de-construction” with the English genitive “apostrophe s.” (Up to my very last revision I found myself still contemplating replacing “The voice of Ernesto reverberates…” with “Ernesto’s voice reverberates…” or “The future of the boy depends…” with “The boy’s future depends…”.) Likewise, the use or omission of definite articles cannot be carried over from the original when translating from most languages into English: “…warns me that the fearful thoughts…” should be “…warns me
that fearful thoughts…”

The delicate native ear of the translator will have to listen most closely for these and hundreds of other similar stylistic options or ambiguities. A sure sign of a weak or poorly revised translation is one that reflects too much of the original, one that still sounds somehow like Portuguese (or French, or Spanish, etc.). In other words, a translation that has an accent. This is probably the primary barrier to doing quality translation into one’s second language. While the notion of working only into one’s native language may also apply to any other area of translation, in literature it is absolutely crucial in creating a good or excellent translation rather than one that is barely acceptable or even unacceptable. In more utilitarian work, native language intuition and tone are less important, so long as the accuracy of lexical meaning is carefully preserved and grammatical norms are followed.

Greater Cure Time: By this I mean that, due primarily to the demands for a natural style in literary translation, it is essential that the translator allow plenty of time between readings of the original text. As one reads an original with the intensity required of translation, one’s ear can be contaminated so that the translated product may sound fine to the translator immediately after doing it, even though it still has that accent. Only time away from the work, and from the language itself, will allow readjustment back to native standards.

Respect for Original Literary Values: As stated at the outset, my novel made use of Magic Realism. That means that the reader would often be surprised by talking bats, roving eyes on high, and unanticipated plunges into abysses of hallucination; in other words, things that challenge the reader’s suspension of disbelief. The translator might be tempted to water down such images or to attempt somehow to demarcate the real from the unreal or imaginary, thinking that this will make the work more acceptable to his reader. This is prohibited in literary translation. The work needs to stand on its own.

The Process of Translation

While the steps to the translation of a 500-page book are not fundamentally different from those of a common commercial job, there are some detailed variations in the process.

Read the Entire Work: The piece should be read for pleasure, while imagining it translated, but without giving any specific thought to translation solutions. Is this the sort of book that would read well in the target language? Do I enjoy what I read? Is it of high quality, something worth the effort of translation?

Make a Trial Translation: Try translating some passages, a few pages, or a chapter. Is it doable and interesting? Have someone else read your work. Make the commitment with the author or other owner of the rights to proceed, having shared your sample with him or her.

Do a First Draft, Chapter by Chapter: Set out on the job in easy units. Reread each chapter before translating it, this time thinking specifically of translation solutions.

Reread Each Paragraph Before Proceeding: While translating a chapter, stop to reread each paragraph, unless rhythm, cohesion, and a smooth flow militate against stopping that often. This minute reading will catch the grossest of errors, such as omission or duplication of lines, or sentences that make no sense. Nonsensical sentences almost always have their basis in a single word skipped or misread, or misunderstanding of the sentence structure, especially in long, complex sentences.

Allow Time to Pass: Once a chapter is finished, allow at least a day to pass before reading the entire unit again, checking once more for completeness, mistranslation, and nonsense, but also with the ear closely attuned to the cohesion and flow. I sometimes became surprised at this point at how well the translation read, as the underlying literary values began to emerge, often invisible in the closeness of the act of translation. At this point, English style, although important, takes a back seat, favoring an accurate rendering of the original meaning, both explicit and implicit. Keep the original at hand throughout this reading, so that it can be consulted to verify accuracy.

When Finished, Reread the Entire Book: From the computer
screen, concentrate on flow and style, eliminating awkward phrases, words that do not sound quite right, idiomatic expressions that may have been translated literally or inadequately. It is important to read fairly quickly, moving along to see how it reads as a whole. The original is available for consultation, but will not be used unless a doubt appears concerning meaning or tone. Attention to English style is paramount at this point. Does it have an accent? Does it stand alone as a book written in English?

Print and Reread: Once revised on-screen, print the book, paying attention to formatting issues like page numbering, consistency of spacing, and typography. This time, concentrate on typos, misspellings, punctuation, among other things that are much easier to see on paper than on screen. Of course, you must be attentive to errors of all sorts, and may change words that had been doubtful the first time through. Any footnotes or quotations from other works are double checked and verified at this stage. This is really your last crack at the work until it goes to an editor.

Lexicon: Creation and Maintenance of Glossaries

As in any translation, glossary building and maintenance is very important, particularly in long texts, where it is easy to forget something one has looked up before.

Hard Disk Resources: You should have at all times on-screen dictionaries available for consultation. In my case, I use Portuguese, Portuguese-English, and English: *Aurélio Eletrônico*, DIC Michaelis UOL, and Microsoft Bookshelf, respectively. You will make very frequent use of the thesaurus function of Bookshelf, or a stand-alone thesaurus, as you seek a variety of words for a particular concept, or in order to have access to your passive vocabulary—words you know and recognize but might not think of using immediately.

Format: I initially created a new glossary for each chapter, using a simple table in Word with columns containing the original word, English translation(s), chapter, and page where the original was found. After the first few chapters, I merged individual glossaries into a master one. I endeavored to enter a word every time I looked one up. My glossary contains many words that I already know in Portuguese, but my look-up represented a search for a variant beyond the first equivalent I might think of, or when a word seemed not to be used in a familiar way.

Repeated Concepts: Certain concepts were used repeatedly and needed a lot of variant translations to be available.

In my case, the concept of “sad,” for example, was so pervasive in the book (*triste, abatido, melancólico*, etc.) that I copied the entire contents of the Bookshelf Thesaurus entry for “sad” into my glossary so that I could have immediate availability to such words as “dejected,” “joyless,” “dreary,” “cheerless,” “unhappy,” “melancholic,” “gloomy,” “despondent,” “desponding,” “downbeat,” “unhopeful,” “pessimistic,” “defeatist,” “despairing,” and “hopeless.”

Unusual Words: Many words are not in standard dictionaries. In my book there were hundreds of references to mythology, philosophy, history, nobility, pharmacology (hallucinogens and ancient cures), and the names of plants that my *Aurélio Eletrônico* and other references ignore. In this situation, specialized dictionaries, and especially the Internet, are the salvation. Even the names of foreign leaders and their titles, as well as place names, are usually different in Portuguese and English: Wilhelm versus Guilherme versus William; Eugenia versus Eugène, etc.

Wealth of Vocabulary: In order to match the depth of the original vocabulary with target-language lexicon, you may have to use words in the target language that you do not usually
Other Specific Issues Encountered

The following are a few language-specific issues I dealt with during the course of my translation. Though the examples are language-specific, you may find yourself dealing with similar situations in the languages in which you work.

Sentence and Paragraph Length: Portuguese, like Spanish and perhaps other Romance languages, has what seems to the English reader to be an enormous tolerance of, or even penchant for, long sentences. Sometimes the long sentences are what we call “comma splices” or “run-ons” and can be simply clipped apart. More commonly, however, it is necessary to do some reformulation, such as adding in the subject again or substantially changing the word order. One thing that cannot be done, except occasionally, is to leave the monsters in place. (Again, see Clifford Landers’ Literary Translation: A Practical Guide for thoughts on dealing with overly-long sentences.)

Paragraphs, like sentences, may seem endless. The English-language reader demands white space on his page, that is, frequent breaks in the paragraph that correspond to changes of direction. To comply, I introduced many new paragraph breaks. The dialogue in the original certainly did not follow the English norm of a new paragraph for each time the speaker changed. A single paragraph would include back-and-forth dialogue, as well as the words of many interlocutors alternatively. These were all changed to English standards for paragraph breaks, significantly altering the appearance of the page and increasing the friendliness and accessibility of the text.

Literary Citations: Because the biography is that of a writer, that writer’s words were sometimes included. On my first time through, I did a rough translation into English of the author’s Portuguese translations from French, primarily as a placeholder. On the second or third reading, I replaced my translations with those of the standard English version, using Alexis Lykiard’s fine 1994 English translation of Maldoror, adding footnote attributions.10

Somewhat more problematic were the words of other authors cited by Ducasse, particularly Baudelaire; the young poet had a tendency to misquote Baudelaire on purpose, or combine separate poems. I used a variety of sources for Baudelaire’s words, and had to do some splicing together, and in some cases maintain my English translation from the Portuguese when I was unable to find a usable standard English citation that corresponded to the text. At one point in the book there is an extensive biblical quotation, and I went to the King James version in English, thus preserving the archaic nature of the original and using language familiar to most English readers.

Curses, Blasphemes, and Taboo Words: This is always a challenging area of literary translation, but one that can often be fun. At one point, the young Ducasse, incensed that someone has been going through his journal, blasphemes the suspects, using highly literary terms he picked up in his reading. That flabbergasts his fellow students, who comment more on his words than what they mean. In order for their reaction to make sense, I had to find something equivalent in English. I went to some websites specializing in “Shakespearean blasphemy” and came up with a good equivalent. In dealing with the subject’s masturbatory fantasies, I had to have available a variety of words for the male organ, usually relatively
tasteful euphemisms, rather than the most coarse of words which might first come to mind. This was quite a challenge, for as Clifford Landers points out, “English is surprisingly deficient in words midway between clinical terms like ‘intercourse’ and its street equivalents.”¹¹ The crucial thing in dealing with curses, blasphemes, and taboos is achieving stylistic equivalence, so that the reader of the translation gets the same sense of delight or repulsion as the reader of the original.

**Place Names and Addresses:** My author did extensive on-site research in France and Belgium, and included detailed descriptions of the urban geography of Paris and Brussels, as well as the southern cities where the poet studied. In most cases, he uses Portuguese words for “street,” “square,” “garden,” etc. When he did this, I used English associated with the original French names. However, where the book uses Place, Rue, etc., I used the French.

**An Artistic Endeavor**

If you are an experienced translator with an interest in literature, I would certainly recommend that you consider the possibility of doing literary work. Start with small projects done largely for amusement and exercise, and work up to a major work. Literary translation is an artistic endeavor, and as such, can be enormously rewarding intellectually. It is also an excellent diversion from the day-to-day reality of bank reports and legal briefs.

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**Notes**


