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Self Translations

Autobiography is perhaps the most important literary genre for any study of the relation between language and migration, particularly when more than one language is involved. Removal, whether voluntary or forced, from one place to another often entails learning—and learning to live in—a non-natal tongue. Writing about one’s experience of migration may be a way of preserving and extending one’s relationship with the language(s) of the place and the life one has left behind, while also being a way of exploring and strengthening one’s relationship with the language(s) of one’s destination. Language-acquisition and language-loss are among the most commonly shared migrant experiences, as is translation in all its many forms (including self-translation). Etymologically, metaphorically, and even phenomenologically, migration and translation are closely related—all the more so when migrant autobiographers find themselves fully and continuously at home in no single language. (Even monolingual autobiographers are engaged, figuratively, in translating [“carrying over”] their experience—including their experience of memory—into writing.) My paper concerns the particular subset of migrant autobiographers who *translate their own* autobiographies from one language (or more) to another (or others). Vladimir Nabokov is an especially famous example, but there are many other major autobiographers, including Leila Abouzeid, Carlo Coccioli, Ariel Dorfman, Julien Green, Esmeralda Santiago, and Ilan Stavans, who have taken upon themselves the task of translating their own life-stories—in some cases, to retain greater control over the target-language version; in other cases, as a literary experiment or as a performance of virtuosity. My paper will draw on autobiographies by writers working in and across the languages I myself can read (English, French, Spanish, German, and Italian), as I explore the ways in which bi- (or multi-) lingualism confers a peculiar kind of self-subverting authority upon such writers, who, precisely because of their flexible, hybrid attachments, can no longer take for granted the monolingualist’s typically unthinking affirmation of a single and singular culture. Moreover, the self-translating autobiographer must contend with a particular, interior doubleness, or self-division, amplified by the always imperfect commensurateness of any two languages. If I am fluent in two languages, then no matter how well I know one of them, there will always be some things that I can put better (whether to myself or others) only in the other. What does that say about my relation to myself—and what does it say about the subject(s) of the autobiography I myself have translated from one of my languages to another? And to what extent does my approach to self-translation—my technique’s place on the spectrum between metaphrasis (the literalist pursuit of fidelity) and paraphrasis (the dynamic pursuit of equivalence)—depend upon, or perhaps even help determine, my degree of “likeness” to myself, my portion of feeling nonself-identical?