



A NEWSLETTER FROM JENNY BHATT  
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## WE ARE ALL TRANSLATORS

FOCUSING ON THE ART & CRAFT OF LITERARY  
TRANSLATION & THE TRANSLATING LIFE.  
[HTTPS://BIT.LY/WEAREALLTRANSLATORS](https://bit.ly/wearealltranslators)

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Dear Reader,

If you're a writer or a translator of any stripe, I have no doubt that you've asked this question with every piece of work you've created. Right?

It came to me again this week as I was preparing an excerpt from my upcoming translation, *The Shehnai Virtuoso and Other Stories* by Dhumketu, for a publication venue. Despite this book having been in the "making" since 2017, I still found the odd few words and phrases I wanted to re-do. And this is after the book has been through two rigorous copyediting phases with the Indian publisher, HarperCollins India, and the US publisher, Deep Vellum. In fact, when I edited the US edition earlier this year, I made at least one change on every page.



Most of us have heard of this famous and often-repeated statement: "A work of art is never finished, merely abandoned." Tangential aside: funnily enough, this has been quoted without attribution or attributed to the wrong person many times. The first proper instance of this being said was by Paul Valéry in March 1933 in an essay that he published in *La Nouvelle Revue Française* about his poem 'Le Cimetière marin' ('The Cemetery by the sea'). Here's the full, glorious quote in both the original French and in English translation.

*“Aux yeux de ces amateurs d’inquiétude et de perfection, un ouvrage n’est jamais achevé, – mot qui pour eux n’a aucun sens, – mais abandonné ; et cet abandon, qui le livre aux flammes ou au public (et qu’il*

*soit l'effet de la lassitude ou de l'obligation de livrer) est une sorte d'accident, comparable à la rupture d'une réflexion, que la fatigue, le fâcheux ou quelque sensation viennent rendre nulle."*

The translation is by the author Rosalie Maggio and you can find it in [The Quote Verifier](#) by Ralph Keyes. Both Maggio and Keyes have some interesting books about the art of communication and language that I had discovered during my corporate years. More on that another time.

*"In the eyes of those who anxiously seek perfection, a work is never truly completed—a word that for them has no sense—but abandoned; and this abandonment, of the book to the fire or to the public, whether due to weariness or to a need to deliver it for publication, is a sort of accident, comparable to the letting-go of an idea that has become so tiring or annoying that one has lost all interest in it."*

Sound painfully familiar to you? Yeah, me too. But here's the thing. A literary translation is also a re-interpretation, it is a re-contextualization of a source text for a new readership. Given this, the urge to always-be-editing is understandable, right?

In [Translation as Recovery](#), Sujit Mukherjee briefly addressed this question in his essay titled 'The Craft Not Sullen Art of Translation' (he was "translating" Dylan Thomas, who wrote an entire poem titled '[In My Craft or Sullen Art](#)'.) Here's Mukherjee's take (as a writer, translator, translation theorist, publishing professional, academic and more):

*"Finally, when is the translation over and done with? Here is an area in which the translated work enjoys an enormous advantage over the original. A novel or a poem or a play in the original tends to get fixed in form as soon as it becomes widely known. Famous authors have, of course, revised even their published works in subsequent editions. But no revision can ever match the free hand with which a translator can redo his or her own translation or re-translate a text that has been done earlier. Precarious as this may sound, translation bestows an indefinitely long life upon a text whose original career may have terminated much*

*earlier had it not drawn a translator's attention. In other words, a translation is never complete, or is so only transitionally. Was it not the late Ramanujan who once said that a translation is never finished, only abandoned? In conclusion, let me revert to my earlier submission about there being more craft than art to translation. The truly crafty translator will know why he translates, for whom he translates, what he should translate, how much to translate and, semi-finally, when to stop. Even after such knowledge, he may still be in need of forgiveness."*

(Ha. Even Mukherjee attributed that abandonment quote incorrectly.)

Anyway, reading the above made me feel somewhat better about my urge to edit my translation every time I open the book. And, if there's another minor consolation, I tell myself that it's also because I'm getting better at my translation craft. So that can only be a good thing.

By the way, I've been revisiting both of Sujit Mukherjee's essay collections recently: [Translation as Discovery](#) and [Translation as Recovery](#). Though they're not recent, I still recommend them highly. With formerly colonized parts of the world like the one I hail from, much of our translation work is about discovery and recovery even now. My upcoming book certainly has those aims at heart. As Dylan Thomas declared, in that aforementioned poem, some of us translators "labor by singing light / Not for ambition or bread / ... / But for the lovers, their arms / Round the griefs of the ages, / Who pay no praise or wages / Nor heed my craft or art."

Feel free to hit reply to let me know your thoughts on all or any of the above. Or you can share on social media and tag me (links below.) For those of you in the US, have a lovely long weekend.

Best,

[Jenny Bhatt](#)

My upcoming translation, [The Shehnai Virtuoso](#), was given a lovely thumbs-up by [Kirkus](#) and [Publishers Weekly](#). If you're interested in interviewing me for a US publication, please let me know? A fun, casual, two-way conversation about some of the topics we're exploring through these newsletters? Just hit reply.

NOTE: All the books mentioned or featured in this newsletter are listed at the Bookshop below. I earn a tiny affiliate fee if you buy a book from the list. It goes towards funding this otherwise free newsletter. Thank you.

## Some interesting links

[ATTEND: \(July 19, 2022; 2 PM BST\) Translating Multilingualism? Part of the BCLT Summer School Panels collection by British Centre for Literary Translation](#)

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[ATTEND: \(Aug 22-27, 2022\) Summer Multilingual Translation Workshops. Part of the 2022 Multilingual Translation Workshops collection by ALTA](#)

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[READ: When it comes to language, who decides what's "correct"? by Danielle Dionne \(Duolingo Blog\)](#)

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[READ: Words Matter: Language-Affirming Classrooms for Code-Switching Students by Andrea Castellano \(Cult of Pedagogy\)](#)

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[READ: A Text Adrift: How does the death of the author change the task of the translator? by Tim Parks \(The New York Review; paywalled possibly\)](#)

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