

Translation and tradition: the translator as mediator between two literary systems

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Abstract: This paper discusses the impact of translation on literary traditions and the sociological elements which contribute to the shift of the canon. The effort of translation to enlarge and enrich a literary system makes it a powerful tool for the introduction of new aesthetics and trends as well as the ideology implied in them. A translation of a literary work is, in fact, a criticism of that work, a point of view on the author and the text. Poggioli's idea that translation is an interpretative art, like music, half way between reproduction or craft and a complete original creation is vital for this approach.

keywords: Translated texts, literary canon, translation and ideology.

Translated texts

Translation studies today are concerned with the translated text and they no longer centred on the idea of faithfulness to the source text. A relevant issue is to know the fate of a literary work, what has been called the TT-orientated approach to translation, that is, the target text orientated approach to translation, which comes from a literary view of translations rather than a linguistic one.

Barthes gives us a semiotic approach to meaning: words, he said, are no longer the pure form through which we can get to meaning, but they are objects themselves, with the trace of all the possible meanings, and their relation to other kinds of discourse. Meaning is, therefore, not something waiting to be expressed, but a horizon of semiotic production, as Gadamer would also assert.

The study of translated texts reveals that literatures which are stable tend to impose their own codes on the translated works, while those literary systems that are in crisis try to maintain the codes of the foreign texts to revitalize their culture and canon.

But translators are always more worried about the trends and style in the language they are translating into, and therefore a translation can always tell us a lot about the receiving literature at a certain time. Even though the idea of translation has changed a lot since Cervantes' times, his metaphor in *El Quixote* is still worth remembering: in the second part of the book (II, 62) he compares translating to observing a Flemish tapestry from the other side; although you can see the figures, they are full of threads which

darken them. This idea that translations let us see the weaving of styles is to be taken into account for a new idea of the history of literatures and their trends.

In translation studies today, scholars compare texts and contexts, not languages, as it used to be done in the past, among other reasons, because linguists have failed to produce a general theory of translation. The discipline, from the linguistic point of view, is divided into two branches: one which is descriptive and theoretical and another ~~one~~ which is concerned with the teaching of translators.

The descriptive studies included different fields of study: product-oriented, that is the description and comparison of different translations of the same text, function-orientated, studying the function of the translated text within the new literary context and process-orientated, concerned with the decision process on the part of the translator

The shifting canon

Thinking about translation from the point of view of literary history, Jakobson stated that the idea of a synchronic literary system does not coincide with the literary period because the books which count for the literary period are only those close in time, while if we talk about a synchronic literary system, books from other literatures and also those belonging to the past which can be read in translation are also part of it.

This wide view of the literary world has been structured and analyzed by Even-Zohar in his Polisystem theory, in which the idea of literary canon acquires a complexity which gives us a more realistic idea of the life of literary products with the concepts of centre and periphery of the system, that is works with prestige and others which begin their life as part of the underground, among others.

My experience with the translation of two plays by the eighteenth-century playwright Sheridan into Catalan, *The Rivals* and *The Critic*, has given me occasion to think about the gap filled by these translated texts because, on the one hand, they had not been translated before and, on the other, even though they are in modern Catalan, they provide a greater understanding of a literary tradition inexistent in the receiving language, as Catalan literature was in the 18th century in decline and did not produce interesting literary works, much less in theatre.

Therefore, it is not enough to catalogue an existing creative literary production, but it is important to include all books published and available at a certain time to establish a hierarchy. This exercise leads us to the inevitable problem of what is and what is not literature. If Jakobson says that for a verbal message to become a work of art the poetic function must be predominant, Mukařovský perfects the thought saying that the aesthetic function in a work of art is determined by the social context and values in society and that the line between aesthetic and non-aesthetic objects is dynamic and what was not a work of art at a certain time can be appreciated as such later in history. A work of art stands between the past and the future, it breaks the rules of the past and is destined to be part of the future rules. Tradition is the substitution of systems, and this process may take place at a different pace. It can be fast or slow, depending on social circumstances.

There's a constant need to reassess the past. John Donne was recovered by T.S. Eliot, Góngora by Dámaso Alonso. And the selection of texts, the kind of edition or the textual models used give us also the clues to the literary trends of a certain period. When a literary work is included in a new context, there can be new qualities perceived which had not been seen before, and translation is the perfect example of this phenomenon.

The Prague School talked about translation as the clash between two different literary and linguistic systems. The philosophers from that school think that linguistic differences are not so important as the changes due to the literary and historical context.

On the other hand, Jauss, in his theory of reception, partly influenced by Gadamer's hermeneutics, says that a literary work is the text plus its reception, and this leads Jauss to state that meaning can only be partial confronting SUBJECT the idea of an eternal and immutable meaning, because we can only understand it from our historical context and imagine the past, but we cannot conjecture about future interpretations.

Tamachevskij wrote an article in 1928 where he says that the thing which is interesting for the literary history is not the qualities of the original but the image we have of it and the way in which one literature interprets another. The case of Pavese in Spain, for example, is interesting, where he is much more well-known and valued than in Italy due to the prestige of the translations and the critical literature about them.

Contact between traditions

Frederich Schleiermacher in *About the Different Methods of Translation* [1813] (2000, 111) appreciates the enrichment which translation means to a language: "we shouldn't ignore the fact that in language there is so much beauty and strength that only due to translation have developed and been rescued from oblivion".

One of the first issues which arise when we think about translation is the fact that there have been texts describes as translatable and others as untranslatable, especially as far as poetry is concerned, with all the possibilities in between raging from a great acceptability and consent in meaning to great discussions about certain interpretations of famous texts. The reasons why some texts are considered untranslatable have to do with the historical and social circumstances not something inherent in the language. You need to have the same aesthetic movements to make a good translation feasible. Symbolist poetry would not be so difficult to translate into a literature which also had a symbolist movement. When I undertook the translation of a play by Carlo Goldoni, *The miser* (1756), from the Italian, I made some reflections on the place he occupied in his tradition and the impossibility of translating the complete meaning of his works. His plays represented a break with the *commedia dell arte*, where all was based on improvisation and some extremely simple plots called "lazzi" with very stereotyped characters, while his comedies produced humanized and complex psychological types and were rich in peripety which showed social behaviour. Still, Godoni used some of the characters from the *commedia dell arte* and changed them gradually, so the Italian public and readers could understand different shades of meaning from their knowledge of comparison with the old tradition and the new uses.

On the other hand, sometimes, we can adopt foreign genres as in the case of Japanese poetry, for example. A literature has to adapt the style if it doesn't have anything similar to a "Haiku" in the target language, the three-line poems, but once there have been translations, the "haiku" technique may become a style in that language as has happened with Catalan due to the translations from the beginning of the 20th century.

The modern idea of untranslatable texts comes from Croce's aesthetics, where he says that it is impossible to give a new aesthetic form to something which already has one. But Walter Benjamin thinks that translation inevitably breaks the limits of language and literary traditions and that this is a very good thing for a language and literature and what really makes it interesting and worth the effort.

The contact between traditions facilitates translation and a text which at a certain time is untranslatable may not be so in the future due, precisely, to translation and mutual interest as well as criticism between cultures. From that point of view, culture written in English has a serious problem: "In the UK the most optimistic statistics indicate that 6% of books are translations but these include technical and non-fiction translations. Literary translation only makes up 2% of the total output.//In Australia, things are even worse. Barbara McGilvray and collaborators in Sydney indicate that fewer than half a dozen books are translated every year." (Skrabec, 38139). The Slovene writer Andrej Blatnik made an interesting comment in a recent conference at an International Pen gathering: "Where to export? Only when the voice of someone else is heard can "free choice" begin. Who loses from these statistics? Those who do not have a choice or those who cannot be chosen?" (*apud* Allen 2007, 22123).

The introduction of new ideology

The polisystem theory developed, among others, by Even-Zohar studies literary phenomena and the way in which literary works relate to each other. And it also studies the history of interpretation and the history of the different rules according to which texts have been written and interpreted.

So the main point is not to study translations themselves but the discovery of the models which have produced them. The idea of canon, of centre and periphery, so important in the polisystem theory, includes ideology, economy and social status. Sometimes social status is more important than the number of books sold; others it is the opposite. Today, publishing houses and the state institutions are the new patrons of literature and the arts in general, and they are very important in the construction of aesthetic ideology. In the past it was not elegant to mix money and literature; in fact, money was not considered at all in literary studies, but today we know that the economic processes related to literary phenomena are fundamental for the understanding of the literary system.

Even-Zohar talks about the importance of subcultures in the literary system, because they push towards the centre and keep the system dynamic and alive. He states that without the stimulation of a strong sub-culture, any canonized activity tends to gradually become petrified and that the first steps towards petrification manifest themselves in a high degree of boundness and growing stereotypization of the various repertoires. Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* or Baudelaire's *Le Fleurs du mal* had been on

trial before becoming part of the canon. These authors were accused of indecency because of their literary work, which was at the time on the periphery of the system.

The stability of a literary system does not depend on the tendency to change, that is the more it changes the more unstable it is; it depends on its capacity for assimilating change. If it can assimilate change, it is stable. Translation can either bring innovation or reinforce the established canon, depending on the place which the literary work occupies in the new literary system.

Pascale Casanova, in her book *La république mondiale des lettres* (2004)¹, compares each language with a kind of currency: “and these currencies clearly have very different values on the global literary marketplace” (Allen 22123). This dynamic view of languages comes mainly from the prestige of literary traditions and therefore it is important to understand their workings. Today though, culture does not develop in the way it used to, through the discussions of scholars or the impulse by artists, but it is constructed to make money. We talk about the “cultural industry” and we see events such as anniversaries (either of someone’s death or birth or others) determining the “modernity” of literary works. These rather artificial events produce criticism, books on the market and prestige for an author and literature, and are very often sponsored by state institutions and, therefore, censored.

Regarding translation, it was Lefevere, in his book *Manipulation of Literature* (1985), the scholar who studied translation as rewriting, and together with Susan Bassnett the ones who introduced ideology into the considerations about translation. From this point of view, the translated text can be seen either as a battlefield or a meeting place of two cultures, or both at the same time. We all have our own idiolect, our preference for certain vocabulary and structures, and our idea of register may vary slightly or dramatically according to our experiences and readings and we pour all that into our translations.

Feminist writers and translators are at the extreme in the range of changes in texts due to ideological reasons and they feel justified in changing syntax and contents in order to avoid reproducing patriarchal structures. This attitude, which has its powerful reasons to be followed, is not so clearly a good idea in translation such as to lead to a modification of the text which would be too different to what is expected, in fact, Suzanne Jill Levine sees translation as an act of (sub)version².

Translation as criticism

The concept of faithfulness is a historical concept; the idea today is that there is a dynamic existence of literary works and that the survivable of a literary work implies its modification and evolution, through translation and also through criticism.

¹ Pascale Casanova, *La république mondiale des lettres* (2004). Harvard University Press.

² “Translation as (Sub) Version: On translating *Infante’s Inferno*” (1992), in *Rethinking Translation. Discourse, Subjectivity, Ideology*, 75-85. ed. Lawrence Venuti. Routledge: London.

Taking again Goldoni as an example, his plays were first seen as light comedies, but through a Marxist analysis, they were considered as social criticism and read as a literary foreshadowing of the French Revolution because in them the nobles were made fun of and women wanted to decide their own destiny.

Our idea of a text determines our translation. Criticism and the status of a literary work are ideological filters which influence our interpretation. Benjamin says that translations are half way between a literary work and literary theory because they imply a critical view of the text.

The philosopher Gadamer, in his hermeneutics, compares translation to a conversation to reach an agreement, trying to find what there is in common between the author and the translator. But Poggioli, I think, is the one who came up with the best idea when he said that translation is neither a creative art, like painting, nor a reproductive art as most crafts, but an interpretative art, like music. I agree with the idea of the original text as a musical score which will inevitably be interpreted differently by each of the possible interpreters.

Going further, Paul de Man in 1986³ wrote that translators, emphasising certain aspects of the original text and neglecting others, do away with the idea of "equivalence" and therefore translations are always new creations. Even though there is truth in that remark, translation is always based on somebody else's work and that should be respected. The task of the translator is a humble one, because he is a mediator he is not to be too present in the text; very often, when a great writer translates a literary work, one can find signs of his style, vocabulary or linguistic preferences in the text, then the author is not really a good translator. To translate one has to be chameleonic and respectful of the otherness of the text, conscious of the changes and aware that there has to be a reason for them, that they ought to come from a deliberate choice based on study and the reading of the classics as well as the innovative works in both traditions.

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³ *La resistencia a la teoría* (1990) [1986]. Visor: Madrid.