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The Translator as Participant/Creator

In recent years, translation theory has increasingly recognized the importance of studying the translator's active role in the production of texts and knowledge. Recognizing the agency of the translator as a meaning-maker, a communicator engaged in a creative process and as a participant in social processes that can shape literary traditions and institutions, leads us to ask: how do we theorize the translation subject?

In his recent book, *Translation and Identity* (2006), Michael Cronin underlines the fact that the agency of the translator is an "embodied agency", in that the translating act always takes place in a "temporal positioning". Cronin further explains the notion of embodied agency with reference to the philosopher Charles Taylor, who speaks of all human inquiry as being "engaged, embedded in culture, a form of life, a world of involvements" (Taylor 1995: 61-20). As living human beings caught in this "world of involvements", this web of life, translators grapple with the fluidity and complexity of relationships that spring up between difference and similarity, between individual and collective, between familiarity and otherness, in any given translation situation at any given point in history. Relationships between languages are not fixed. As Cronin puts it, the power nexus between languages is constantly shifting; thus, our translation

relationships have to be endlessly calibrated (“The Cracked Looking Glass of Servants” 161).

The field of Ecosemiotics (Hoffmeyer 1996) provides useful metaphors for discussions about the translator’s agency. Ecological principles describe meaning as always relational, negotiated and contextual. Meaning is fluid and emergent but humans constantly perceive unities and systems. Meaning-makers must thus learn to recognize fixed systems and unities as situated perceptions (Bateson 1972). In this paradigm, the translator is not translating a fixed meaning, rather, she is perceiving and creating a set of relationships, based on her observation of relationships in source and target texts, cultures, languages, societies. In the complex humming and buzzing of relations and perceptions of relations in the translating act, the translator becomes a keen observer of her own agency. Working at the meta-process level, the translator learns to “observe observed systems” (Bateson 1972).

The impossibility of an objective meaning or equivalence is widely discussed in post-modern theories of translation. Andre Lefevere (1992) referred to the act of translation in terms of packaging, remodeling, manipulation, refraction, spectrums, and re-writing. Translators, he says, shape images of works, authors and cultures. Along the same lines, addressing the question of the translator’s presence in texts, Douglas Robinson characterizes translation as writing. He presupposes that the translator is a writer and states that she does not

become *the* writer but, rather, *a* writer, who is much like the original author “because they both write, and in much the same way, drawing on their own experiences of language and the world to formulate effective discourse.”

Robinson discusses the translator’s subjectivity in light of revisions of concepts of originality and authorship, and highlights the importance of looking into the relationship between the translator and the author and into translators’ images of themselves.

For a reflection on our own translation practice, being aware of the meta-process level allows us to see ways in which, as translators, we juggle with conceptual frameworks, cultural representations, definitions of culture, culture of cultures, power and prestige relations, and ideologies of all sorts, all of which are potential constraints and at the same time, profound sources of creativity.

Following the work of ecological psychologist E.S. Reed, applied linguist Marc Fettes (1999) refers to human knowledge as an active knowledge that comes from a lifelong effort towards meaning and which is driven by “imaginative awareness”. An individual constantly adjusts perceptions so as to have productive encounters with the world. Translation, then, would constitute a specific use of imaginative position-taking expressed in the context of discourse.

As literary translators, we work with high “imaginative awareness”, as we strive to recognize the nature of literature. Thus, the very human act of narration informs

the translation and is revealed through it. According to Antonio Gramsci (in Morera 2005), all human activity is narration. We constantly seek to express the connection between the individual and the universal. We constantly seek to create unity. But we must remember that this unity is nothing more than a construct, a narration to lift us out of the fragmentation we wish to flee.

In literature, unity is elusive, dependant on the intellectual predilection of the reader. Again, unity is relational, emergent. A piece of literature contains forms of consciousness that organize our experiences in a given culture at a given historical time. As translators we re-create, induce a possible unity through a focused and imaginative process of writing, passing, as Gramsci would say, “from feeling to knowing to understanding and back to feeling.” The unity of the target text thus being as relational and emergent as that of the source text.

Theorists of culture perennially ponder the Worfian premise of the impossibility of transference of cultural understanding. Cuban literary theorist Margarita Mateo Palmer (1995) rails against the hegemony of European interpretations of Cuban irony and magic realism—how could a European truly understand or ever express the culturally and historically deep-rooted irony and magic realism of the island? Palmer asserts that the perception of magic realism among foreign readers can never be isomorphic with the Cuban perception.

According to Michael Cronin, in our globalized diversified world, it is time to go beyond the binary source/target definition of translation in which a local or

national culture is more or less rendered but inevitably betrayed through translation. Nowadays, the local and the non-local are imbricated in each other. The translator's reflective-creative approach exposes the emergence of new third-order cultural forms through translation. Respect for the sacredness or wholeness of the source culture can be present in the translation alongside an awareness of otherness, a vision of the whole that grows from the local, a vision of diversity that goes beyond the local and speaks to multiple readers.

Of course translation involves much more than the translator building a bridge to transport deterministic, border-oriented or nationalist notions of culture, static and information-based as they are, into a source text. Cultures are not homogeneous and communities are not fixed. Lawrence Venuti acknowledges the potential violence of cultural appropriation while at the same time seeing a relationship between translation and community formation, in that, besides belonging to one or several communities, the translator also *creates* communities or helps to bring them into existence; besides being a product and a participant in a given community, the translator participates by helping potential narrative and interpretive communities unfold. According to Venuti, the communities fostered by translating are initially potential, signaled in the text, in the discursive strategy deployed by the translator, but not yet possessing a social existence ("Translation, Community, Utopia" 484). In this sense Venuti sees translation as utopian: it has the potential to create imagined communities around that which is considered foreign; "in supplying an ideological resolution, a translation projects

a utopian community that is not yet realized” (“Translation, Community, Utopia” 485).

Culture creates translation and translation engenders culture. Aware of the constraints and the endless possibilities of juggling the individual with the universal, the translator-creator participates in a non-hegemonic literary world that embraces human diversity.

An Example: Rosalind Gill’s reflection on translating “Libreta de Abastecimiento” (“Ration Book”) by Camilo Venegas. (Cuba)

Meta-questions:

Why did I select this poem? My cultural background and relationship to Cuban culture.

I am from an island (Newfoundland), a strong minority culture with intense nationalism, self-awareness as a culture, a culture of brilliant irony, oral storytelling, and linguistic prowess. I identify strongly with these very elements of Cuban culture and have become very attached to Cuban culture, particularly in its most popular and social forms. My artistic objective here was to re-create for my readers a recognizable “echo” of the human values I have learned to appreciate so much in this island culture.

How did I think about my translation in terms of cultural capital?

There is an expectation that foreigners will be interested in translating Nicolas Guillén or Nancy Morejón or other well-known canonized Cuban poets. People constantly ask me why I have not translated such poets. While translating the canon may enhance one's chances of getting published and invited to literary events, I have my own selection agenda. I am interested in translating contemporary poems that express a certain integrity I am aware of in Cuban culture. By integrity, I mean the expression of a certain idealized, yet pained and difficult relationship Cubans have with their society and amongst themselves – a vision of society and of their role in that society combined with a deep love for *cubanidad*. It is as if almost every Cuban has a keen social vision, something to say about the fate of the island and a deep emotional investment in it.

What ideological considerations did I reflect upon?

I would describe myself as a liberal left-wing academic sympathetic to the values of the Cuban revolution but I do not take absolute polemic stances when it comes to Cuba. I have traveled to Cuba widely and frequently and have participated in academic and artistic exchanges (conferences etc.) on the island. My conscious objective in this project was to express the integrity of the simple pathos of human values expressed in the poem, quintessentially local and Cuban

as it is, to broader values recognizable across borders. In the end, it should be said, however, that as the translator, I am not devoid of ideology – there is no doubt that my selection and translation of the poem were informed by my support for the plight of minority cultures in the world who are attempting to maintain their integrity and survive a geo-political situation globally that could crush them.

My personal avoidance of the Cuban polemical situation does not, of course, mean that the poem does not provoke ideological responses. It is almost impossible to avoid polemics in the Cuban context (I think of a quote from Pedro Juan Gutiérrez that even *proteína* is a political word in Cuba.) The topic of the Ration Book could be seen as a delicate one in Cuba and the content can evoke from some readers absolute responses to the success or failure of the revolution. For example, American/Miami re-packaging can see the poem as anti-fidelista. Canadians, some of whom have their own, if on times tenuous but sympathetic view of the revolution and some of whom are as a Cuban once told me “drunk on leftist ideology” may see in the poem the heroism of revolutionary sacrifice. Public readings of this poem always evoke interesting responses.

How did I come close to the Cubans’ reading experience of the poem?

I showed the poem to as many Cubans as possible—mostly in Cuba but in Toronto and elsewhere, as well. Watching Cubans react to the poem was central

to my interpretation. Firstly, Cubans were surprised that the seemingly mundane and so close-to-home topic of the Ration Book should form the subject of a poem. But in many cases, Cuban readers were moved by seeing an intimate portrait of their daily life and more than one person ended up with tears in their eyes. Cubans were also somewhat perplexed that a foreigner would be sticking her nose into private and far from glorious aspects of Cuban daily life and of the revolution. Cubans have been living a profoundly collective adventure together for the past forty years, and like Newfoundlanders, they have a certain exclusivity about membership in their culture (Newfoundlanders refer to the CFA – “come-from-always”, and the Cuban use of *extranjero* (foreigner) and the many other words to designate non-Cubans is a loaded indeed.) More than one Cuban mentioned to me that as a North American, I could never conceive of or endure the sacrifices that are demanded of Cubans – a sensation of invasion of privacy for sure. Discussing the poem with Cubans helped me get closer to the pain and the pathos, the humour and the determination that characterizes the life of the Cubans, and sharpened my sense of the very high social awareness Cubans have of themselves as a people.

What influence has the translation had and how has it created a community?

I have had many heartfelt reactions to this work. The subject of Cuba always draws attention and many North Americans are interested in the plight of the

island. However, many are unaware of what Cuban life is like and base their image of Cuba on stereotypes (salsa music, communism etc). Readers of the translation have told me that they recognize the intimacy and the immediacy that convey Cubans' wholeness as human beings in the poem. The most valuable experience and on-going lesson for me is showing the poem to Cubans. In my experience, seeing this poem published in Spanish alongside its English translation is, for many Cubans, an opportunity to look at themselves in the mirror. More than one Cuban has thanked me for choosing this poem. One poet in Pinar del Río even thanked me in the name of the Cuban people for taking the time to translate an evocation of their daily life—underlining the deep social and cultural love of *cubanidad* that had inspired me as the translator in the first place.

Conclusion

Narratives in translation exist in a continuum that is connected to that of the contact between languages, cultures and peoples. Reading this poem may give Canadians new images of Cuban life and literature. It also has the potential to give Cubans another image of their own culture. This is an example of communities that can form around readings through translation and testifies to the translator's creative participation in cultural exchanges. If we give the last word to Cronin, translation is by definition the enactment of language contact, and in that sense, it relates to our ideologically-bound relationship with our living

space and with the world at large, our “active sense of global citizenship” (*Translation and Globalization* 6).

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