

THE TASK OF THE PROFESSIONAL TRANSLATOR

It might seem presumptuous to refer to Walter Benjamin in my title. His magnificent essay has so illuminated the centrality of literary translation in human culture: the creation of multiple after-lives for literary works, the renewal of languages, the striving after the universal pure language of sublime poetry. However, his essay remains trapped in a certain Messianic mystical tradition: it does not descend to the messy business of real flesh-and-blood translation. And I presume that in wishing to promote professional collaborations we must address this messiness: at least the many appeals to scientific methodology now heard within Translation Studies point to the need to grapple with the raw materials of the process that is the livelihood of professional translators within the framework of a transnational publishing industry. Not ideal notions or metaphors about the translators of Cervantes but studies of their drafts, correspondence with publishers, their readings of previous translations, their interpretative strategies and writing arts.

It is that series of relationships I wish briefly to explore in the context of a translator's editing which seems to me the heart of the matter and the real evidence of the creative messiness that calls out for scientific research. My paper will avoid references to words such as 'equivalence', 'source' and 'target', words of little use in a description of the process of translation. Like 'fidelity' and 'infidelity' this is a vocabulary that belongs properly to the history of translation and not to a contemporary critical analysis. Likewise with theoretical approaches that marry an appearance of scientific thought and language with vague affirmations about the 'black box' of the translator's mind or that picturesque phenomenon that floats through the air of many a translation conference — the head of the translator — closely related to an original intention in the writer's head — heads that by hook or by crook we must get inside.

Traductology enjoys so many mirages: think-aloud-protocols based on artificial experimentation, discourse analysis that isolates translation from any meaningful context... In the single chapter that Basil Hatim and Ian Mason devote to literary translation in their book on Translation and Communication, they consider the translation of a play but insist on 'leaving aside the thorny question of whether the translation is for the stage or for the page'. In other words, they too wilfully ignore the real context of translation. In the current vogue for corpus translation, kilometres of text are being fed into computers to draw the most obvious conclusions and to ignore and obfuscate the activities and tasks of literary translators. If we translating theoreticians or theoretising translators or promoters of literary translation are serious about our art, tomorrow we should start campaigning in our respective countries to establish archives that would house the raw materials of actual translation processes. The archives of translators, their manuscripts, their print-outs, contracts, correspondence... Serious empirical research could then begin and translators and translation would be its messy subject not its malleable, rather distant object. This is certainly a project that the British Centre for Literary translation is embarking upon and I hope that the Centre's archive will attract the papers of translators of Hispanic literatures. What might researchers in these

utopian national archives of translation begin to tackle?

Literary translation is a writerly activity engaged in by professionals in the context of a multi-billion dollar publishing/film/opera industry. Translations are realised through subjective consciousnesses historically and culturally constructed yet in a constant state of becoming, a stability that every new translation renders unstable or indeed every change in technology or ownership. Take, for example, the new practice of transnational publishers having translators simultaneously prepare translations from a yet unpublished manuscript that may still be subject to authorial or editorial change. Detailed studies of the life-work of individual translators will illuminate the centrality of translators as intercultural mediators. Such studies would enhance the status of professional translators — something necessary for the very existence of these research projects. So many translators are modest, deferential and self-effacing and discard the evidence of their own artistic creativity.

I will give two examples of the need for such studies. Take the career of Gregory Rabassa who has translated over 80 works of Peninsular and Latin American Spanish and Portuguese writers. It is through the words of Rabassa that magical realism hit the English-speaking world and transformed its fictions. Or Ted Hughes, the late poet laureate who dedicated so much of his energy to literary translation. A commemorative volume published by his publishers Faber & Faber carried no chapter on his translations. I am glad to say that Oxford University Press has commissioned Daniel Weissbort to write a book on Hughes's contribution as a translator. Other researchers have published short studies on the work of individual translators — Jean DeLisle, Sherry Simon, Lawrence Venuti — but these are small islands in the ocean of traductology. Professional translators should cherish their archives and write their own interpretations of what they do, keep diaries and be equipped to do so by their training.

Here I will conclude with a brief discussion of the centrality of the editing process to any understanding of professional literary translation. Much discussion of translation — whether in theoretical writing or journalistic reviewing — is conducted blind because of the ignoring of this process. There is also a certain fear of subjectivity and the interpretative strategies of translators whether these are explicit or implicit. Yet when I translate I translate with words that emerge from my linguistic consciousness, from my linguistic repertoire that is being stretched by the very act of translation. If translations renew language, the renewal starts clearly with the translator as the maker of that new language. As I translate reading and re-reading the novel I'm translating, I write and re-write, edit and draft and re-draft. In so doing I refine my interpretation of the multiple resonances and meanings in the language of the novel, part consciously, part unconsciously. I discover, I infer what areas — historical, cultural, linguistic — I need to research, what questions I want to ask the writer. I start from the realisation that the novel is attempting something new in its own language, and that almost every word will have occluded, intensely personal resonances for the writer that no reader will ever grasp. As the reading and writing to-and-fro continues, the novel will strike chords with my memories, history, will spark off streams of images, chains of words... translating doesn't operate in a neutral space. However, there will be phases of void, of dryness, of inability to proceed.

Of course, in the meeting of self and other, there is no question of absolutes. The being of the translator already assumes a mixture of own and other culture that

creates the context for the demanding encounter of literary translation. In all of this, there is a professional ethic of responsibility to this otherness that has its reality in a critical self-consciousness, in the interplays of meanings and writings, in the deepening interpretative strategy that is searching for a coherence of writing an entire work, each word, sentence, image or snatch of dialogue being part of a complex architecture encompassing hundreds of pages.

Now this is the messiness research has to submerge itself in, if it is to have any pretence to science. And it is a messiness that is materially abundant if only it can be saved from the dustbin of the word-processor. It is also the messiness that is at the centre of this gathering to promote professional partnerships to bring about translations between Hispanic and English literatures. If we can recognise the creativity of the art of literary translation and make the necessary adjustments to the status of the professional literary translator in the English and Spanish-speaking worlds and their respective publishing industries, then our collaboration will be established in new, exciting contexts for encouraging the critical reading of literary translations.

REFERENCES

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