Complaint Concerning the Lack of History in Translation Histories

Incompatibilities of the prose-effect hypothesis

It is possible that prose translations of verse actively assisted in the progressive prosification of European lyrical expression in the nineteenth century. This "prose-effect hypothesis" implies that prose translations did not merely reflect developments in the prose poem, vers libre and poetic prose, but were causally related to these developments. As such, the hypothesis is properly historical in that it identifies a change process, it constructs an explanatory narrative, it is potentially falsifiable on the basis of empirical evidence and it addresses a contemporary problematic (it is pertinent to the position of any translator faced with a choice between verse and prose as target forms). My problem here is not with defending the hypothesis as such, but with explaining its apparent incompatibility with several widely held beliefs according to which nineteenth-century translating was predominantly "literalist", "mimetic" or oriented towards "formal equivalence". According to these beliefs, 19th-century translators should massively have rendered verse as verse, and the prosification of genre systems should only have been affected by the transfer of existing forms. That is, although it is possible to see certain modes of prosification as having been assisted by mimetic translation practices (for example, the transfer of blank verse from English into German and Dutch, or Laforgue's formally mimetic translation –of Whitman as a major step towards the vers libre), the prose-effect hypothesis insists that some translations were more than mere repetitions and actually participated in a process of historical change. Either the hypothesis is wrong or trivial, or there is something fundamentally wrong or trivialising in some contemporary approaches to translation history. I shall defend the latter opinion.

History is neither archaeology nor criticism

Most of what are commonly accepted as texts on the history of translation in fact belong to either archaeology or criticism. It is perhaps useful to propose a few basic definitions: - Archaeology addresses the questions "who?", "where?", "when?" and "what? (which text?)". As such, it provides the data needed to defend or attack historical hypotheses. - Criticism explores intertextual relations in order to address the question "how?" and to project the values needed for an ethical or aesthetic appreciation of historical hypotheses.

Although these two activities roughly correspond to what the Göttingen group terms "äuβere/innere Übersetzungsgeschichte" (Frank 1989), I believe that neither can become properly historical until they project substantial responses to the far more vital questions- peculiarly overlooked in the Göttingen programmes- "why this text? (why not another?)", "why in this way? (why not in another)" and "with what actual effect?". Archaeological

research can reveal circumstantial motives obliquely pertinent to such questions (e.g. "Mallarmé translated Poe in order to fleece an American publisher"); criticism may provide more theoretical insights (e.g. "Baudelaire translated Poe in order to create a doppelgänger"); but neither archaeology nor criticism are able to formulate hypotheses or problematics strictly pertinent to dynamics of change; neither archaeology nor criticism are able to justify and describe the finality of their potentially unlimited gathering of "fascinating" data or random recovery of "forgotten" texts. In an age of excessive information and limited orientation, it is simply dangerous to assume that an incipient discipline must accumulate data before it can say why it should accumulate data. Good answers depend on good questions, and neither archaeology nor criticism are designed to formulate the basic historical question "why?".

Three superficial views

This problem may be appreciated through the analysis of three textual fragments which, although they have something of archaeological and critical interest to say with respect to the prose-effect hypothesis, are unable to say why one kind of translation should have given way to another. That is, they are historical in all but their capacity to grasp and explain change... which, in history, should be everything.

1. One of Henri Meschonnic's main concerns is the cultural value of literalist translation, particularly of the Old Testament. But his observations are not limited
2. to Biblical contexts:

Au XIXème siècle, la philosophie du langage de Humboldt (des langues comme visions du monde) autant que la politique des nationalités entrent parmi des composantes romantiques d'un traduire littéral. Hugo juge une traduction bonne quand elle est littérale. Versions de Samuel Cahen (1830), plus tard de Reuss, versions érudites oubliées depuis longtemps. [...]

Certaines traductions [...] survivent de la fin du siècle dernier ou du début de ce siècle. [...] Les passages dits poétiques sont ceux que la religion et le goût littéraire édulcorent le plus par leur mise en prose: reflet de ce qu'on croyait qu'on pouvait écrire, traduction entièrement idéologique" (1973,416-417).

2. Diametrically opposed to Meschonnic with respect to Bible translation, Eugene Nida has also had cause to reflect upon the passage from the nineteenth to the twentieth century:

The classical revival of the 19th century and the emphasis upon technical accuracy, combined with a spirit of exclusivism among the intelligentsia, conspired to make that century as pedantic in its attitudes toward translation as it was toward many other aspects of learning. [...]

Undoubtedly the principal exponent -for English- of a more literal tendency in translating was Matthew Arnold, who tried to reproduce Homer in English hexameter, and insisted upon close adherence to the form of any original. [...]

The 20th century has witnessed a radical change in translation principles" (1964, 20-21).

Two otherwise opposed researchers thus both agree that the nineteenth century was an age of broadly literalist translation and that the twentieth century has seen the emergence of a less literalist tendency. The only difference is that whereas Meschonnic praises formal fidelity and regrets the prosification of verse forms, Nida believes that "in the translation of poetry one must abandon formal equivalence and strive for dynamic equivalence" (1964, 177). But this conflict strictly concerns criticism, not history.

3. James S. Holmes rejects such wilfully normative translation histories and instead proposes period models based on abstractly generated translation strategies, two of which are "mimetic form" (verse as verse; prose as prose) and "organicform" (TT form developed from the semantic material of ST). The historical projection pertinent to our hypothesis reads as follows:

The mimetic form tends to come to the fore among translators in a period when genre concepts are weak, literary norms are being called into question, and the target culture as a whole stands open to outside influences. Hence it is understandable that the mimetic form became the dominant metapoetic form during the nineteenth century. [...]

As fundamentally pessimistic regarding the possibilities of cross-cultural transference as the mimetic approach is fundamentally optimistic, the organic approach has naturally come to the fore in the twentieth century" (1970, 98).

Once again, a literalist nineteenth century is opposed to a non-literalist twentieth century. Although Holmes does at least offer some attempt at historical explanation -an apparently global change from optimism to pessimism-, he in fact goes no further than do Meschonnic or Nida towards describing a dynamic that might prove or disprove the prose-effect hypothesis. Like Meschonnic and Nida, his approach is only superficially historical and remains of mainly archaeological and critical interest.

Evidence should be more than anecdotal

It is remarkable that, although they have selected very different kinds of evidence as representative of the nineteenth century, the above writers all reach the same basic conclusion. Whether one looks at Humboldt, Arnold or "weak genre concepts", it seems that the nineteenth century must turn out literalist. Or is this merely a question of selective vision?

It is not difficult to question the massive epistemological homogeneity assumed by these approaches. Consider, for example, the fact that Wilhelm von Humboldt not only developed the idea that languages are different world views -as Meschonnic helpfully reminds us -but also saw prosification as part of the historical development of the human mind (1836, ccxlvii ff.) and, as a translator, in fact believed in the same principle of

"organic form" that Holmes attributes in the twentieth century (Vega Cernuda 1989, 203). Meschonnic's argument in favour of literalism merely repeats the reductive vision of Humboldt promoted by twentieth-century relativist linguistics, making a historically complex figure little more than an anecdotal footnote. Similarly, and even more blatantly, Nida's reference to Matthew Arnold's literalism conveniently fails to mention that Arnold's principles were formulated in the climate of debate which in 1861 opposed him to Francis Newman. It is not at all clear why Arnold should be more representative of 19th-century translating than might be Newman or indeed the general terms of their disagreement over how to translate Homer. In these two cases, as in countless others, it has been forgotten that theoretical notions are elaborated in situations of conflict or doubt -nobody writes a theory to state the obvious-, and that conflict and doubt require at least two opposed opinions. It is simply unhistorical -not to say undialectic- to suppose that one kind of translation or theory is immediately able to make all others disappear.

Faced with this problem, Holmes at least admits that his various models "must be viewed not solely as period forms, but also as literary constants which have continued to exert an influence long after their heyday" (1970, 99). This approach in fact accepts that almost everything is possible at almost any time and that historical research can thus only hope to explain phenomena of statistical concentration. Exceptions must be marginalized, and Holmes does indeed marginalize in order to protect his thesis of a literalist nineteenth century: in a footnote he claims that, within the context of the literary history of translation in the Western European languages, "the French, with their predilection for translations into prose, are something of an exception" (1970, 105). The majority rules, and translation archaeology is there to count the votes.

There are several things wrong with this democratic view of historical importance. First, since historical change is habitually motivated by discontent minorities, its dynamic tends to escape monolithic periodisations based on numerical majorities. Second, in the field of translation history, archaeological data are not passively numerical points but instead form actively directional lines: translations have a habit of going from and to specific times and places. In the case of the 19th-century, the concrete network formed by these lines is moreover of highly unequal distribution. The latter half of the century reveals a complex transfer pattern increasingly concentrated around Paris, with London as a second major centre up to about 1890 and Berlin-Vienna gaining in importance after that date (Pym 1988). This centralised network should be no surprise for Spanish comparatists, since it is well known that many Slavic, German, Scandinavian and even English-language texts reached Spanish through French. However, the central role played by Paris would perhaps surprise Holmes, who classifies French translation habits as merely exceptional. It should be stressed that, in a world of moving objects, some exceptions can exert considerable influence precisely to the extent that they are exceptionally central.

A basic distinction is to be made here between "through-translations", which occupy central positions in that they influence further translational receptions, and "terminal translations", which exert no such influence. Non-anecdotal translation history should be more concerned with locating through-translations than with comparing terminal translations, which is the

business of translation criticism. A critic might remark, for example, that Poe's "The Raven" was translated into Spanish-American verse by Pérez Bonalde in 1887 and into Russian verse by Bal'mont in 1893. But having remarked this globe-spanning mimetic parallelism, the translation critic cannot construe this as evidence of any globally versifying strategy. After all, the most influential through-translations of Poe-Baudelaire's mid-century versions-were in prose, and it was in prose that Europeans came to see the American as something more than the jingle-jangle rhymer he remains for English readers. The textual parallelisms dealt with by critics are no more likely to guarantee historical importance than are the statistical majorities located by archaeology.

Periodisation should not be arbitrary

The end of a century undoubtedly exerts strange effects on cultural mentalities, but there is no reason to believe that people suddenly translate differently as soon as the big numbers change. The use of centuries as units of periodisation can only be useful as an arbitrary grid able to reveal processes of more determinate extension. This is the only sense in which the term "nineteenth-century translation" might correspond to a unitary entity, and then only as an initial way of approaching a more meaningful historical level.

When images of translation networks are pegged to two-dimensional grids formed by years and cities, they indicate, albeit roughly, their own spatial and temporal extensions. Non-arbitrary periodisation may thus come from the study of translational movements themselves, independently of centuries and political regimes. But the task is hazardous and ultimately depends on the nature of the problematic to be addressed, since it is materially impossible to locate and plot all the translations carried out in any modern period, and the texts to be dealt with must thus be pre-selected in terms of the historical hypotheses to be tested. When this is done for poetic translations into French, there appear to be two quite different periods for which the prose-effect hypothesis might empirically be justified.

The first, from 1780 to 1820, may fairly be described as Romantic in that it recuperated fragments of mostly Nordic or exotic epics and ballads; as Suzanne Bernard notes in her study of the poème en prose, these translations were in prose and constituted "un mouvement contre la versification polie stérile" (1959, 27). This period was also associated with a cult of pseudo-translations, of which the prose poem was itself an aesthetically equivalent form, "a reference to or translation of a poem that could have been written" (Scott 1976, 353; cf. also Bernard 340-342, 494, Bertrand 24 ff.). It is not difficult to see how prose translations came to play a key role in the development of the prose poem as a major move towards prosification.

The second period, between 1870 and the turn of the century, includes the influence of Baudelaire's translations of Poe, the impact of Wagnerian libretti translated by Dujardin and Chamberlain in 1885, and important poetic translations from English blank verse, not only by Laforgue but also by the French-Americans Viélé-Griffin and Merrill (Bernard 261ff, 538). These translational moments would have been considerably less important had they not been associated with considerable debate over the vers libre: when Mallarmé lectured in

Oxford, the most scandalous news he had for English ears was that "on a touché au vers"...,
that the French had made an issue of the free verse forms the English had had for centuries.
The peculiar thing was that the French were in fact very good at making an issue of the
already acquired, and the aesthetic at the heart of prosification - that poetic form should
ensue from content- was successfully transferred back into English through works like
Merrill's Pastels in Prose (1890) and was to play a major role in the formation of Imagism,
in Joyce's debt to Dujardin, in Pound and Eliot's appreciation of Corbière and Laforgue, and
in the fact that a poet like Yeats could include a page of Pater's prose in the *Oxford Book of
English Verse...*

Such would be the rough outlines of two periods for which the prose-effect hypothesis
might be justified and a relational process be described. Yet it cannot be denied that,
between these periods, the fixed forms of the Parnasse and the Preraphaelites were firmly
associated with literalist mimetic-form translation, and that this alternative aesthetic
continued to exert an important influence through to the end of the century, especially on
periphery of the literary network of the time. It is in terms of a kind of retarded mimesis
that remarkable cases like the verse translations by Pérez Bonalde and Bal'mont are to be
explained, and not through any assumption that periodisation should correspond to
immediate homogeneity. Periods should be described as processes, and some processes
take more than their theoretically allotted time and space to work themselves out.

Translations are not passive

Of the three cited arguments, Holmes' is the only one to suggest any historical causality.
There is, says Holmes, a relation between things like "weak genre concepts" and "mimetic-
form translation". Although the exact nature of this relation is far from clear, Holmes
generally considers that "weak genre concepts" etc. were the historical conditions of
"mimetic form translation" in the nineteenth century, and not vice versa. That is, translators
worked in a certain way because certain conditions existed in the target cultures; Holmes
does not consider the obverse possibility that the target cultures were as they were because
of the way certain translators worked. Translations are in this way typically taken as data
that need to be explained in terms of their historical context, and by commutation as data
that can potentially shed light on that context. Thus, according to Antoine Berman, "la
traduction est porteuse d'un savoir sui generis sur les langues, les littératures, les
mouvements d'échange et de contact, etc." (1984, 290); or again, and more originally,
according to Goethe "the relations between an original and a translation are those that most
clearly express the relations between nation and nation" (cited ibid, 92). Translations are
rumoured to "provide knowledge" or to "express relations"; they are seen as results for
which the historian apparently has to locate explanatory conditions in the contextual
languages, literatures or cultures. But surely no translation has ever been written
exclusively for a future historian or to explain a target culture? Surely translators work not
to express existing relations between cultures but rather to introduce new elements, to
change at least one of the cultures and the perception of the other, and thus to alter existing
intercultural relations? Surely translations are not just passive expressions of a stable world
but also active transfers of knowledge and thus in themselves potential partial causes of

wider historical changes...? But few researchers seem methodologically inclined to accept that translations actually do anything as historical acts.

The prose-effect hypothesis evidently ensues from an alternative view and probably errs by attributing excessive social power to translators. In a chicken-and-egg situation, it is senseless to talk about chickens as if there were no eggs, or about eggs as if there were no chickens. If prose translations stand in a causal relationship to prosification, this clearly does not mean that prosification was exclusively the result of prose translations, nor that a series of further factors could not in turn explain why such translations were under-taken. Translations cannot be seen as the sole agents of cultural change. But unless some degree of causality is admitted, historical research is methodologically unable to distinguish between important and trivial data, between theoretical declarations of intent and actual historical effects, nor between arbitrary and substantial periodisations. That is, if translations are assumed to be merely passive expressions of wider factors, they elude all the criteria by which propositions like the prose-effect hypothesis might be tested.

Complaint concerning the lack of history in translation histories

The prose-effect hypothesis was not formulated with any specific reference to translation studies; it comes from my doctoral thesis, for which the disciplinary location was the sociology of literature. As a sociologist, I have come to translation history looking for research able to prove or disprove this and other curious intuitions. But although what I have so far found offers a certain aesthetic pleasure in its attention to details, it affords lamentably little practical insight and remains difficult to evaluate in an interdisciplinary context. I have suggested that this situation may be attributed to at least four epistemological shortcomings: (1) archaeological accumulation of data that respond to no explicitly formulated problematic, (2) dependence on anecdotal evidence, (3) arbitrary periodisation, and (4) reluctance to see translations as possible agents rather than expressions of historical change.

Although this critique has been formulated with respect to three very different researchers who are concerned with rather more than history and who merit far more respect than has been shown here, I believe that the epistemological shortcomings they enable us to identify are to be found in most of what are nowadays erroneously offered and accepted as historical approaches to translation.

Works Cited

Berman. Antoine (1984). *L'épreuve de l'étranger. Culture et traduction dans l'Allemagne romantique*, Paris: Gallimard.

Bernard. Suzanne (1959). *Le poème en prose de Baudelaire à nos jours*, Paris: Nizet.

Frank, Armin Paul (ed.) (1989). *Die literarische Übersetzung, vol. 3: Der lange Schatten kurzer Geschichten. Amerikanische Kurzprosa in deutschen Übersetzung*, Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag.

Holmes, James S. (1970). "Forms of Verse Translation and the Translation of Verse Form", in Holmes, James S. (ed.), *The Nature of Translation. Essays on the Theory and Practice of Literary Translation*, The Hague - Paris: Mouton.

Humboldt, Wilhelm von (1836). *Über die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaues und ihren E influss auf die geistige Entwicklung des Menschengeschlechts, Zweiter Nachdruck* (facsimile), Bonn - Hannover - Munich: Dümmlers Verlag, 1968.

Meschonnic, Henri (1973). *Pour la poétique II: Epistémologie de l'écriture, Poétique de la traduction*, Paris: Gallimard.

Nida, Eugene A. (1964). *Toward a Science of Translating with Special Reference to Principles and Procedures involved in Bible Translating*, Leiden: E. J. Brill.

Pym, Anthony (1988). "Les notions de «réseau» et de «régime» en relations littéraires internationales", *L'Internationalité littéraire*, Paris - Barcelona: Noésis

Scott, Clive (1976). "The Prose Poem and Free Verse", in Bradbury, Malcolm, and McFarlane, James (eds), *Modernism* 1890-1930, Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Vega Cernuda, M. A. (1989). "Wilhelm van Humboldt, traductor y teórico de la traducción", Santoyo, J. C. et al. (eds) *Fidus Interpres. Actas de las Primeras Jornadas Nacionales de Historia de la Traducción*, vol. II, Universidad de León.

Cómo citar este artículo:
Pym, Anthony. Complaint Concerning the Lack of History in Translation Histories. *HISTAL* enero 2004. (*fecha en que se consultó este artículo*) *<dirección de URL>*