Anthony Pym

ON TRANSLATOR HISTORY

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Where and when did you begin to be interested in the history of translation?

Translation history? Better: Translator history, or the history of translators. There are two answers:

First, in about 1993 Mona Baker asked me if I would write an article on the 'Spanish Tradition' for the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies*. I replied that I had no special expertise in the area; I suggested she contact Julio-César Santoyo; she insisted, so I started reading, to see what could or should be done. As I waded into the mists and mysteries of the twelfth-century translators (Toledo and all that), I very quickly became hooked. Not only was the material itself fascinating, but the existing research was full of the most wonderful, biases, partis pris, or simple wishful thinking, much of it due to nationalistic frameworks unsuited to medieval dynamics. The more I worked on medieval Hispania, the more I become convinced that what was needed was not simply more raw information, but some serious thought about the models and methods of translation history itself.

The second answer is a little different. I would have to go back to 1981-82, when I was wandering around Paris in search of a topic for a doctorate, or more exactly in search of a director for my research (the two sides tend to modify each other). Now, Paris is not exactly the most hospitable place for young Antipodeans with very bad French; those were quite hard years. Gradually I found myself becoming part of a loose grouping of foreign students, with minimal contact with local French people. We formed a community of semi-nomadic would-be intellectuals. It was then only natural that, in my doctoral research on writers of the 1890s, I became interested in the similar networks formed by the foreign writers in

and around Paris. The community of foreigners I had around me was some kind of model for the community that I eventually came to study. And the study became mildly passionate, even obsessive: I was looking up the addresses where the foreign writers lived, I would go to where some of the meetings had taken place almost a century previously, I was reading the journals of the period, the countless "Notes from Paris", the published correspondence. That was a strange and fascinating kind of community: mobile, moveable as they say, even volatile, alienated, exploited (I think of the Machado brothers working on a Garnier dictionary), pretentious (Wilde), alcoholic (Darío), hypocritical (Nordau), entirely marginal with respect to French society and letters. Yet those were the people ultimately responsible for the myth of French and international Symbolism; they had considerable historical power that went well beyond what they themselves were aware of.

Many of them were also translators, of course, since that was one of the ways they made enough money to get by. But at that stage my research was not on translation. I worked in a Groupe de Sociologie de la littérature, and I was quite happy with that location. Later, in need of money, I got a grant to study in the Comparative Literature department at Harvard. Needless to say, there I was basically in the same kind of community, the network of foreign research workers, entirely on the fringes of any kind of American society. It was a more self-assured network, better paid, perhaps more arrogant with respect to the locals. In any case, it was thanks to that network, and not to Comparative Literature, that I became interested in negotiation theory as a set of ways to think about social and cross-cultural relations. That general interest has remained. When I ask about how intercultural communities are formed, how they gain and exercise power, my models owe much to regime theory and increasingly to cooperation theory à la Axelrod. I guess I arrived in the United States with the standard French Marxism of the 1980s, and left with Neoliberal ways of thinking about the same Marxist questions.

I mention this earlier background for two reasons. First, I was and remain basically bored by Americans discovering Derrida, Bakhtin, Foucault, Baudrillard, and the other usual French suspects. I had come from that; I still see no reason for

going back to any politics of difference, subversions, critique, or otherness. I simply have a different set of questions (How do intercultures use power? How should they use power? Can answers to these questions help me live my own life?); I seek rather more affirmative or orientational responses. Second, my prime interest has never really been in translation as such. Even now I don't claim to be doing any history of translations. I am far more interested in histories of intercultures, or of intercultural relations as seen from the perspective of the people involved. It just so happens, quite logically, that many translators have been active members of intercultures, and that some translations have had considerable cross-cultural influence. But it would be stupid to suggest that all kinds of mediation are really translation, that intercultures are peopled only by translators, or that translation is even the main mode of using power in this field. Such claims are academic fancy, used to create institutional ponds where minnows can seem whales.

Why should we study translation history?

Well, there are quite lucrative professional reasons for pretending to know something about translation. Translation programmes are still popping up like mushrooms across the globe; they are currently full of students; there is a large training base providing funds for academic jobs, publications, and occasionally research. At the same time, this growing community of would-be translators includes some very good students and some wonderfully dynamic modes of interdisciplinarity, and the graduates enter a very wide range of mediating professions (a third, if that, might become professional translators for any respectable period of their life). These factors make translation schools effective training grounds for the intercultures of the future. They also make them places where we might expect power to accrue. This is because, with increasing globalization, power ensues from manipulating information rather than controlling lands and seas. The people who are able to use and develop complex codes, in whatever field, in whatever set of languages, are the ones most likely to influence the destinies of our cultures.

So it is quite obviously there, in the translation programmes, that I would like to try to give the developing intercultures some sense of identity, some idea of why they should operate according to non-national criteria. History is a very good way of doing precisely that. Ultimately, I would like to be able to say to professional intermediaries, be they translators or otherwise: You are in fundamentally the same position as all these intermediaries of the past; that is your identity; that must be the basis for your ethics; so please think beyond the possible glories of Brazilian, Spanish or Australian specificities.

From that, it follows that there are less-than-ideal reasons for doing translation history. It is quite possible, for example, to write a catalogue of all the literary works translated into English and to thereby proclaim the strength and glory of English literature, which has become the "storehouse" to which many minor literatures now turn to translate works to which they do not have direct access (such was the role Schleiermacher sought for German). Alternatively, one could write a history designed to show how little has been translated into English, and how every translator for the past three centuries or so has translated in the same bad way, give or take the odd isolated demi-hero. For me, both those histories would be equally short-sighted; neither would do more than characterize the target-language culture. If you want to write about English-language culture (or Brazilian culture, or Hispanic culture), you don't particularly need translation history to do it. Just write directly about the cultural institutions and education systems, or about good versus bad ways of writing, and spare us the pretence to be doing something different. Such histories can merely reinforce the national identities of mediators. And that is a long way from what I want to do with translation history.

Of course, there is a certain pragmatism to be admitted here. Research funding tends to be channeled through national or sub-national bodies; our language departments tend to be structured according to the same criteria; there is thus both external and internal support for a national frame or focus. We have to work with that. But I, for one, would prefer projects based on networks between sets of cultures, or on regional circuits, in order to trace the role of intermediaries rather than the glories

of nations.

What are your opinions of Descriptive Translation Studies (DTS)?

You mean the moment of Holmes, Even-Zohar, Lambert, Toury, Lefevere, Hermans, D'hulst, and friends? Since that is a self-critical and evolving group, much of what I might say is already being said within it. There were and remain some very good things there:

— The original emphasis on empirical work, on getting down and looking at actual translations, broke with a lot of academic waffle about good and bad translations. (Note, though, that in the medieval field this break happened early in the century, when pragmatists like Haskins and Thorndike insisted on going back to the manuscripts instead of repeating the stories.)

— The emphasis on system was similarly necessary, since it made researchers look beyond isolated linguistic details or isolated displays of elitist erudition (I mean, it was them or George Steiner).

— There was and remains a close link with translation practice behind many of the above names, despite the scientistic need to pretend that the academic is one person, the translator another.

Unfortunately those points come with rather more negative riders:

— The emphasis on empirical work set up descriptivism in false opposition to prescriptivism, as if there could be any purely non-evaluative description. (Even the Kantian distinction between judgement of fact and judgement of value devolves into a precarious separation between things we choose to agree on, and those we can legitimately choose to disagree on; it can be maintained without recourse to any myth of the non-effectual speech act.) This in turn supported a pretence to scientific detachment, which is okay only as long as the scientists don't believe it.

— The emphasis on system worked in much the same way, but with rather more disastrous consequences. Since the things being described were translations rather than translators, the resulting systems were sets of structural relations, with as

much openness and dynamism as you like, but without people. This led to a kind of descriptivism fundamentally unable to answer the questions I was asking. But it no doubt worked well for others. When Theo Hermans points to "the translator in the text" (the way the translator is linguistically figured or eclipsed in a translation), he is apparently quite happy to believe he is studying people. Personally, I need a rather more sociological and collective subject; I want to study more than translations.

— Third point: These are researchers with a background in literary studies, and often a certain practice in literary translation. This is perhaps why they have instinctively looked at texts rather than at people. This might also be why their questions—when indeed they set out to do something more specific than just "study" a given corpus—often seem to be rather unimportant, or of interest only to narrow coteries of literary specialists. I mean, we find a lot of technical theorizing, a few quite respectable corpora, occasional roasting of traditional chestnuts, but not many actual findings that could say much to anyone from beyond the discipline. I think this shortcoming has been felt and responded to, at least when José Lambert (a professor of Comparative Literature) addresses issues like the role of global media networks on mediated communications, or when Itamar Even-Zohar offers his models as a means of culture planning.

Little by little, DTS is becoming rather more than descriptive. When Even-Zohar openly criticizes Israel's immigration policy in a discussion article ostensibly on translation theory (in *Target* 10:2, 367), I quietly cheer within, not because I agree or disagree with him (who am I to opine on such matters?) but because I do want a way of doing history that can have something to say about things like immigration policies.

> The DTSers are good people to have a beer with. Grand philosophies and fancy words tend not to hold much sway at their table.

Do you think DTS have been central to historical studies on translation?

Not as much as is sometimes believed. A lot of work has been carried out by rather more traditional scholars, using the methods of philology or comparative literature. There are no solid grounds for talking about a 'pre-scientific' stage that was suddenly enlightened by DTS.

What recent work have you been carrying out?

In 2000 I published *Negotiating the Frontier: Translators and Intercultures in Hispanic History*, which is the fruit of the interest that started back in 1993, so I guess it embodies about seven years of work. That project has been criticized in Spain for not being "systematic", for sliding from point to point (just as the article I wrote for the Routledge encyclopedia has been criticized in Spain for "insisting on certain aspects to the detriment of others"). What seems not to be appreciated is that I spend a long time on pre-1492 Hispania, and then not enough on what happened in Spain after that date. So my work seems to lack "system" (which at one point becomes synonymous with giving equal textual space to each successive century). I can live with that criticism. I mean, if one is fundamentally interested in the history of intercultures rather than the origins and adventures of the Spanish state, there is simply much more of interest in medieval muliculturality than in eighteenth-century francophile fops, and much more going on among the external colonizers and exiles than in the heart of the Catholic canon. In order to show that, in order to say something, as a foreigner, about things Hispanic, it is obviously necessary to buck any quaintly quantitative "system". Such systems, you see, tend not to allow me, a nomadic intermediary, to find a past for myself in these lands.

I have also started rewriting a 1992 book called *Translation and Text Transfer*. But then I started to put the word "localization" in the place of "translation", and the book has since become something quite different, a set of questions about the effects of globalization. At the moment I don't quite know where those questions will lead.

What major projects are there in the pipeline?

The five-volume *Oxford History of Literary Translation in English*, to be co-edited by Peter France and Stuart Gillespie; the De Gruyter *Handbuch* project seems hopelessly overdue but might appear one of these years; there is a Historia de la traducción en España under way; the Translation Committee of the International Comparative Literature Association currently plans to put together a series of sub-committees along regional lines (Asia, Africa, Europe, North America, Latin America) although the aims are not yet clear; Jean Delisle has produced a CD-ROM on the history of translators and I believe he is continuing to develop it as a major teaching resource. In the meantime, the Fédération Internationale des Traducteurs abolished its History Committee this year because no new projects were forthcoming. In sum, there is no real shortage of projects in my part of the world. What is lacking, however, is any viable alternative to the single-target-language frame (translations put together according to the language they are translated into). If you think about it, it would make just as much sense to write histories based on source languages ("the fortunes of Catalan literature in translation", for example), if and when our educational institutions were set up to handle such mosaics. And it would make even more sense, for me, to write about historical networks linking sets of cultures. But we are not yet there.

How do you view translation historiography in Latin America and, more specifically, in Brazil?

I view such things with great interest, if and when I can find people working in the area. Indeed, a great deal depends on finding the right people. I mean, looking at the Routledge Encycopedia of Translation Studies, we find an article on "Brazilian Tradition", then another on "Latin American Tradition" (which should have been called "Spanish American", since it only deals with Spanish), one on "Spanish Tradition" (mine), and nothing at all on Portugal. Why? Basically because it was hard to find the right people. Things have become a little easier thanks to initiatives like Jean Delisle's Repertory of Historians of Translation. But even so, a reviewer in

Spain has criticized the Latin American article because it was written by Georges Bastin, then in Venezuela and now in Montréal. In any case, Bastin, like Pym, is not Hispanic, and we are going to be suspect whenever we tread the turf that someone thinks is their own national past.

Why aren't there any major projects on historiography of translation encounters in the Americas and the exchanges between Spain and Spanish America and Portugal and Brazil?

Because Portugal and Spain have long had their backs turned to each other, and Brazil has long since floated away from Portugal. The ties are stronger between Spain and Spanish America, and are actively promoted by current Spanish cultural policy, but this has not yet given fruit in the area of translation history. In all cases, however, the deep historical relations are obscured by stories of national liberation.

Sometimes these things are more easily seen from the outside. I mean, it makes sense to teach Portuguese and Spanish together (plus Catalan, Galician, or whatever), or at least in the same department, but that only be done with any degree of political correctness if your department is in Germany, France, the United Kingdom, etc. It is then quite natural for a scholar from beyond the Iberian mix to see these cultures as one, or at least attempt to write about their relations. For example, it was relatively easy for me to argue that there should be an “Iberian” chapter in the De Gruyter Handbuch, but there remains absolutely no recognition of Portugal in the project for a Historia de la traducción en España being organized by Lafarga and Pegenaute, nor, I hasten to confess, does Portugal appear in my own book on “Hispanic” history.
In the communications of our age, the intercultural has long exercised more effective power than the national. But in the organization of our histories, we may have some time to wait.

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