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TRANSLATING THE WILL TO KNOWLEDGE: PREFACES AND CANADIAN LITERARY POLITICS

THE CLOSE HISTORICAL RELATIONSHIP between translation and literary rhetoric might once have seemed like a major obstacle in conceptualizing translation history. How can the historical specificity of translation be isolated when there seems to be so much repetition and sheer falsehood in the discourse on translation, when dense thickets of topoi spring up at every turn? How can we attempt to valorize translation when translators have for centuries defined their work in terms of the most conservative literary values of their age?

In fact these disadvantages have become sources of new interest over the last few years as translation history devotes itself not to writing a linear chronology of translation events but to articulating translation to the diverse writing practices and values engaged in specific contexts. The intense relationship between translation and axiology then becomes interesting in itself. We come to understand the 'translator' as traversed and indeed constituted by the various discourses which define literature and its functions in a particular historical context (Guillerm, 1984: 59).

Paratextual elements in translations – the peripheral matter which accompanies the texts of translations – are useful tools in analysing the constructed subject of translation in its various historical forms. Of particular interest are the signature (the name of the translator) and the preface (the word of the translator). The name of the translator, for instance, like the name of the author, as Michel Foucault (1977: 124) has shown, is a sign which has historically variable functions. For example: the 'author' takes on historically specific functions as an element of explanation in critical discourse; it is used in different ways in the physical presentation of books and bibliographies and in library classification; the legal and copyright provisions associated with authorship are constantly evolving. Similarly the 'translator' takes on context-specific meaning; we can follow the history of the name of the translator by identifying the way in which it appears physically in books (which translations carried the name of the translator) as well as in critical discourse and in the changing legal provisions given the translator in copyright law (Simon, forthcoming).

As for prefaces, their content and function have yet to be analysed systematically. Their very presence and frequency at different periods is an indication of the prominence given to the translator: the preface foregrounds the presence of the second hand. And it is significant that much of what has been said about translation until recently has been said in prefaces – that is in

a context where the focus on immediate readership is foremost.

Often rejected outright by literary historians as fabrics of topoi or as texts too directly linked to the political and commercial sponsors of translations, prefaces now seem interesting precisely because of their hybrid role. Since the Middle Ages the preface has spoken a double-language – it is at the same time speech and action. Offering information, it also seeks protection from the outrages of power; advancing propitiatory disclaimers, it also propels the work towards new markets and audiences. It seeks above all to capture the goodwill of the public, as its Latin name the *captatio benevolentia* emphasized. But although some of the terms of this attempt have remained astonishingly stable since the Middle Ages, others have changed dramatically.

I will briefly outline a few elements defining the translator's preface as a historical genre and then look at the preface in the context of the translated novel in Canada – where prefaces have taken on a very-specific ideological role.

Taking the Translator's Word for it

Analysis of prefaces inevitably focuses on the distance between their respective meanings and their effective function. Serge Lusignan in his important study of translators' prefaces in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries in France notes the insistent repetition of a limited number of themes as well as clear indications of the essential political role given to translation (Lusignan, 1986: 129-71). Luce Guillerm in her study of a corpus of 120 prefaces between 1530 and 1560 in France notes as well the overwhelming 'poverty' of their discourse and points to the real receptor of the prefaces – the dedicatee – as the essential clue to the importance of the translation: translations of classical works were dedicated to the king; translations of vernacular works were dedicated to a female member of the royal family. The textual hierarchy mirrors gender values (Guillerm, 1980: 28).

One might think that the ritual nature of prefaces concerns only the pre-modern period, the period preceding what Antoine Compagnon (1979: 235ff.) calls the 'immobilisation of the text:' during the Classical period. But Jose Lambert also underscores the unreliable nature of prefaces during the Romantic period. Criticizing an article which uses a good number of translators' prefaces to prove that there has been a historical change in the manner of translating, Lambert argues that neither Mme de Staël, nor Chateaubriand, nor Emile Deschamps, Amédée Pichot or Mme de Rochmondet are to be 'taken at their word'. The critic must be on guard against their words, he says: 'they mark the significant distance, well-known to translation specialists, between words and actions' ('Lambert, 1975: 397; my translation).

What is particularly untrustworthy about translators and why are

their words so suspicious? One possible answer to this question is of particular interest to our Canadian case and it is the following. At different moments in history, translations have been particularly closely linked to national political aspirations and prefaces are a revelation of this link. This has been shown clearly for the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. The political dimensions inherent in translation were obvious as well to the Romantics. The extremely violent reception which the Italians gave Mme de Staël's 'Letter on the Spirit of Translations' in 1816 is ample proof that national sensibilities were deeply touched by her appeal to translation (de Staël, 1820). If Mme de Staël ostensibly recommended translation as a means for the Italians to rediscover a new sense of national self-affirmation, many Italians understood this friendly advice as an insult. The complex relationship between translation, literature and national sensibilities became a central concern of the new discipline of comparative literature in the last years of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth (see particularly Hazard, 1921 *passim).* The early comparatists clearly recognized the fact that translations serve national interests.

Rather than dismissing prefaces for being too closely linked to political imperatives, I would like to suggest that they be read precisely at this level. In addition to revealing the historically shifting relationship between author and translator and foregrounding the foundations of literary values, prefaces are useful precisely because they trace the contours of literary ideology and expose for us the sociopolitical context which commands literary exchanges.

The 'True' Quebec

Literary translation in Canada is a relatively recent phenomenon, in comparison with European standards. The first translated novels date from the middle of the nineteenth century and translations came in isolated bunches until they took off in the 1960s and especially from 1972 onwards, when literary translation became supported financially by the federal government. Historically English-Canadians have been more interested in translating Quebec novels than the opposite, although there have been periods - including the present - when the reverse has been true. English-Canadians have also much more readily written prefaces for their works (about three English prefaces for one French one).

During the period from 1865 to 1950, a significant number of English-language prefaces explicitly place literary translation within the larger context of the political relationship between English and French Canada. An exemplary preface in this regard is that written in 1890 by Charles G. D. Roberts, a prominent English-Canadian writer, to his

translation of a novel called *The Canadians of Old* by Philippe Aubert de Gaspe (Aubert de Gaspe, 1974: 5-8). This is an important translation, one which was to become a classic, and which has been frequently re-edited under different titles and with different prefatory material. (Along with *Canadians of Old*, and *Seigneur d'Haberville*, it was also given the somewhat misleading title *Cameron of Lochiel.)* In this preface Roberts makes two assumptions which were to ground literary translation in Canada from then on: (1) the French-Canadian novel is a 'faithful depiction' of life and sentiment among early French Canadians; though a 'literary work' it also has important documentary value; and (2) therefore literary translation is a vehicle through which one constituent of the Canadian collectivity can acquire knowledge of the other. 'In Canada there is settling into shape a nation of two races; there is springing into existence, at the same time, a literature in two languages ... We of English speech (he says) turn naturally to French-Canadian literature for knowledge of the French-Canadian people' (Aubert de Gaspé, 1974: 5).

History, literature and politics are joyfully mingled here in a first definition of the vocation of literary translation in Canada. Magnanimous overtures to the literature and society of French Canada stand next to somewhat condescending references to the 'extravagant dreams of French Canadian nationalism' and its 'not unworthy determination to keep intact its speech and institutions'. Roberts also recalls that *Canadians of Old*, which recounts the events of the conquest of French Canada by Britain, has a passage in which the dying Seigneur advises his son to serve the king of England.

In translators' prefaces to English versions of Quebec novels of the first half of the twentieth century, several of the themes which Roberts evoked are repeated. Rivard (1924) says of a series of tableaux by Adjutor Rivard that 'it lays bare for us the generous and kindly French-Canadian heart'; Ferres (1925) says of the tales of Brother-Marie-Victorin that they offer 'a more intimate knowledge of the literature and mental attitude of our French-speaking fellow citizens, leading to a more fully cordial entente': the Walters say of *Thirty Acres* (Ringuet, 1940) that it is the 'most authentic account of rural French Canada since *Maria Chapdelaine',* and Alan Sullivan (Savard, 1947) believes that *Menaud, maitre draveur* 'may be taken as expressing the resilient, fanciful and spontaneous spirit of most of our French-Canadian patriots'. The translators evoke the hope that better knowledge of French Canada will lead to a better political relationship between the two collectivities. Although couched in less naive language, many contemporary prefaces continue to note the social and political context which is the main impulse for translation in Canada.

Prefaces to French-language translations of English-Canadian works are

rarer and quite different in tone. Take for example the preface to the translation by Pamphile Lemay of a historical novel, *The Golden Dog* by William Kirby. The translation was published in 1884, so is almost contemporary with Robert's 1890 preface. This preface is written not by the translator but by the publisher who, in responding to the question – why have we translated this book? – replies in three points: (1) The book pays superb homage to our French-Canadian ancestors, all the more so because it was written by a man 'belonging by blood and belief to a nation which was our longtime enemy; (2) We wish to have our literature profit from the admirable work which this man created out of our very own history; (3) Even though the author is a Protestant, he has a sense of religion far stronger than those so-called Catholic authors who attack the Church. All the same, the editor must admit that a few expressions which were not consistent with the Catholic faith were modified.

What dominates in this preface is the immense weight of cultural difference. The foreign and potentially hostile origin of the author is often recalled. While the preface insists on the representational and authentically historical nature of the work (as Roberts does), it stresses the fact that this image of Quebec's own reality has been rendered by a foreigner. The principal interest of the work is the understanding of this image of oneself that has been drawn through alien eyes. This theme is oft-repeated until about 1955. In fact, in examining the relatively limited corpus of translations into French in Quebec until 1950, one is struck by the large number of works – fictional and non-fictional – which are about Quebec itself. Until very recently, then, Quebec has translated images of itself rendered by others; English Canada, on the other hand has used translation to discover the clue to the mysteries of Quebec. We see then that if these prefaces use similar terms to describe the usefulness of translations, the terms are not used symmetrically. Roberts is translating a representation of French Canada for the English; Pamphile Lemay is also translating a representation of French Canada, but for the French.

Prefaces in Canadian translations have clearly focused on the collective context. They define the 'knowledge' which translations are supposed to furnish in terms of the specific needs of the group. The decision of the Canadian government to fund literary translation is therefore quite congruent with the perspective in which translation has been carried out in English Canada from the start – literary translation is carried out within explicitly social and political parameters.

Literary Values

The obvious question now is – what impact do these pronouncements have on the translations themselves? Is there in the works themselves the

same convergence of practice as in the prefaces? With this question we return to one of the questions we began with: is the word of the translator to be taken seriously?

We have already remarked that when Charles G. D. Roberts defined literary translation as a vehicle for 'knowledge' he defines this knowledge within strict parameters. Translations are to provide for English-Canadian readers an authentic representation of French-Canadian life and thought. This does not mean automatically however that translators adopt an ethnographic approach respectful of the culturally alien origin of the material. On the contrary, as the comparison between Roberts' own version and that of a succeeding translator-editor Thomas Marquis shows, Roberts' version is a classically 'ethnocentric' and 'hypertextual' translation – to use Antoine Berrnan's terms (1985: 48-9) – while Marquis added footnotes and stayed much closer to the text in order to give the work more of a documentary value. The same cleavage is seen in the two simultaneous translations of *Maria Chapdelaine* by two translators, W. H. Blake and Andrew MacPhail, in 1921. One translation exhibits the values of elegance and the supplement of style; the other remains conscientiously transparent and permeable to the specific structures and features of the French.

That the hypertextual translations have become the consecrated texts within the Canadian literary canon is evidence that aesthetic considerations have won out over ethnographic ones. But the presence of the second, alternative, translations points to a tension in Canadian translation. The 'will to knowledge' that translation is to convey is by no means univocal. If translators are unanimous in understanding-translation in Canada as a necessarily collective endeavour, they are less clear about the way in which this knowledge is to be materialized.

The much larger translation corpuses produced in English Canada and Quebec since 1950 have of course substantially broadened the schematic terms which once commanded translations. While some translators' prefaces continue to delineate the sociopolitical parameters of Canadian literary translation, new terms have emerged in areas such as feminist translation.

Until quite recently English-Canadian and Quebec literature have pursued entirely parallel paths; translation has been limited entirely to a role of mediation. Translated works have not been involved in cultural invention, have not (unless very marginally) interacted with the mainstream of literary creation. Feminist writing is one area where translation now plays this expanded role. Nicole Brossard, for instance, one of Quebec's most important feminist writers, has written extensively on translation and undertaken collaborative 'transformance' writing

projects. Translators have played an important role in bringing English-Canadian and Quebec writers together – and there are now nascent, although significant, interrelations. This is a totally new occurrence in the history of Canadian letters.

'Translatability' takes on an entirely different meaning now that similar writing traditions exist in the two cultures. In the 1960s, for instance, there was no really obvious solution when translators had to find equivalents for the aggressive intrusion of English into joual', Montreal urban slang transformed into a literary language. Untranslatability was aggressively inscribed in the writing itself; English Canada had produced no equivalent social or literary reality. While many of the feminist texts are difficult to translate because concerned with the very signifying structures of language, these difficulties fall within the questions which writers (within both language groups) are themselves working with. We understand then that the meaning of translatability far exceeds technical concerns and embraces all aspects of the writing context.

Prefaces give us access to the collective dimensions of translatability, the 'will to knowledge' which creates the need for translations. And in some cases – the Canadian novel is one – they define translation as an activity deeply, and consicously, engaged in the social and political dimensions of literary interchange.

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