Translation: Constructing Identity out of Alterity

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In this article[1] I will discuss the implications of considering translation as a regulated discursive practice whose determinations are historical in nature[2]. In the first part I will attempt to show some of the reasons why it is important for us to look at translation, and then -in the second part- I will take examples of remarks by translators published in prefaces to their translations into French which appeared in the first part of the eighteenth century. I would claim, however, that such an approach would also be fruitful if applied to modern translation theory.

The Importance of Translation

I should perhaps begin this first section by saying that there is clearly something paradoxical and even oxymoronic in such a heading. Translation is, after all, normally considered to be a secondary sort of practice, one of the minor "arts", like pottery making or weaving, and as such hardly worthy of attention. John Denham, for example, already expressed such sentiments in the "Preface" to his translation of the Second Book of Virgil's *Aeneid*, published in 1656: "There are so few Translations which deserve praise, that I scarce ever saw any which deserved pardon; those who travel in that kinde, being for the most part so unhappy as to rob others, without enriching themselves, pulling down the fame of good Authors, without raising their own," The same John Denham, in 1648, began a poem entitled "To Sir Richard Fanshaw upon his translation of Pastor Fido" with the following lines: "Such is our Pride, our Folly or our Fate, That few but such as cannot write, Translate." And this is far from an uncommon attitude towards translation, among critics and readers, and even among translators themselves. In prefaces to their work criticisms of previous translations and translators abound as do indications of why the reader should overlook the weaknesses in the translation being presented for approval. But it is precisely because translation is generally considered unworthy of attention that attention needs to be paid to translation. And this, for several different but related reasons. Firstly, because there can be a certain unavowed interest, on the part of a dominant discourse, in glossing over power relationships inscribed within the context in which translation takes place and which it reproduces, but which it can also make evident[3]. Secondly, because terms such as "normally" and "secondary" -as in "translation is normally considered a secondary sort of practice"- need always to be defined within specific contexts, for it is only then that they are given meaning. If translation is normally

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[2] See St-Pierre 1993 for a discussion of the implications of considering translation as a form of discursive practice.
[3] See for instance the discussion by Vicente Rafael of the role of translation in the Philippines.

considered a secondary sort of practice, what are the limits and what is the content of this "normality": what are the origins of this way of considering translation, how has it be en maintained, and why? And if translation is a secondary sort of practice, what are considered to be the primary practices? Indeed, a history of translation would show that the opposition between primary and secondary practices has not in fact always existed. The devalorization of translation (as mere 'reproduction') at the expense of original writing (considered as 'creation'), for example, has not in fact always been the case; a history of translation would show that translation and writing have often been seen as complementary, rather than contradictory, practices[4]. Writers often learned how to write by translating; translators were often writers as well. The relation of translation to history is therefore a vital one, in that it enables us to put in perspective the norms used by translators, the functions and roles given translations; an approach emphasizing the historical nature of translation will see such norms, functions and roles within their particular contexts, and connected to larger discursive modes.

But to return more directly to the subject of this section of my paper, the importance of translation can be located in the fact that translation brings the readers, writers, and critics of one nation -or of one cultural group- into contact with those of others; it constitutes, in a sense, a form of immigration. As such translation plays an essential role in determining how a nation or group establishes and consolidates its identity, whether this be through *opposition* to foreign influences, through *assimilation* or *naturalization of the foreign whereby differences are erased to as great a degree possible, or through limitation of another*, usually dominant, culture. These are all different strategies of translation, becoming possible at different moments in history. There is, thus, a particularly strong interconnection between translation and the constitution of national identity, and the study of translation can be useful in determining the nature of this national identity, and the nature of the relations nations institute with each other. Seen in this light, translation is a cultural practice with a definite role to play within a given society, serving in a sense as a form of selection process restricting, conditioning, and in any case modulating "cultural immigration". Through translation nations define themselves and in doing so they define others[5].

But it is also worth noting here two ambiguities that lie at the very heart of the practice of translation. The first is that of the opposition between similarity and difference. Translators must produce a text which can stand in a relation of equivalence to another text; however, since linguistic codes and cultural contexts are never equipollent, to translate a text is to transform it. Along with the desire for similarity coexists, then, the fact of difference, and it is the distance which separates the desire from the fact that leads to the quasi-unanimity as to the predominance of "bad" translations, an attitude which can be epitomized by the often repeated Italian adage *traduttore traditore* -"to translate is to betray". Particular judgements

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[4] In St-Pierre 1985 I discuss certain of the complexities which arise when attempting to distinguish between original writing and translation.

[5] Annie Brisset has studied the role of translation in the context of Québec nationalism in her *Sociocritique de la traduction*.

such as this concerning the practice of translation are not really of interest here; rather, what is of interest is the uncertainty such judgements reflect and the reference they make to a norm.

The interdependence of the reference to a norm by which the quality of a translation can be judged and the uncertainty as to that very quality may at first seem yet another paradox, since the function of a norm is to provide a standard, and in so doing a degree of certainty. In the practice of translation, however, since the reference to a qualitative norm comes about as a result of the uncertainty characterizing the relationship between an original text and its translation, this act of reference becomes twofold, and in a sense undermines itself: the norm by which the translation is to be judged is referred to, but so too is the uncertainty underlying the need for such a norm. This need arises out of the very nature of translation, insofar as a translation is merely one reading of a text of which other readings could -and will- be provided (translations of the canonical texts of literature succeed each other with great regularity; and even scientific and pragmatic texts are, although much less frequently, retranslated), but the norm does not provide anything more than a temporary solution for this uncertainty, through making possible the labelling of translations as "good" or "bad". This solution is only temporary since the norm which permits such labelling to take place is tied to particular historical contexts and because the uncertainty masked by such labelling returns to the fore when the context changes. Schematically then, the position of the translator -of all translators, technical as well as literary- can be described as follows: faced with an original text and the obligation to provide a translation, the translator must refer to certain standards in order to ascertain what will constitute an acceptable product for his or her readers, while at the same time being aware that what is considered acceptable is determined not by the text to be translated but by the context in which he or she is working. The historical nature of translation thus becomes clear. If to translate is to betray, a translation always betrays in a definite manner, according to the particular historical norms to which reference is made, whether explicitly or implicitly.

The second ambiguity is that to be found in the relations between nations or within nations, between linguistic groups, instituted and reproduced by translation. To translate, I have already said, means to situate oneself in terms of another defined as "other" and the way in which such a relation is realized can run the gamut from complete denial of the alterity of the culture translated to slavish imitation. When French works were translated into English in the eighteenth century, for example, Englishness was constructed through a coming to terms with what was the dominant culture at the time -the French culture-, and such confrontations were seen even in military terms. Thus J. Ozell writes in his letter to Lord Halifax which heads the translation of the works of Boileau (1712): "...it has been thought by some as rash an Attempt to translate this French Author, as for an English General to attack an Army of theirs. ... But certain it is that the French Genius may be match'd (if not surpass'd) in both, the Pen as well as the Sword; whatever exalted Notions to the Contrary so me amongst us may have, who cou'd relish Slavery itself, if it were but French." The second ambiguity is thus that through translation difference is at one and the same time held at bay (through the process of "naturalization" or "reterritorialization" inherent to all translation, though this can take place to varying degrees) and recognized, since it becomes

that which serves to define 'similarity' (that which each citizen has in common with every other fellow citizen, and which serves to distinguish him or her from those of other nations). And these relations between nations are marked by relations of power, although never, it should be noted, in a simple, unidirectional way. Thus, while colonizers may attempt to use translation as a tool of oppression, by forcing the translated language to conform to the mold of that into which it is translated, thereby, as Vicente Rafael has noted, "articulating the general outlines of subjugation", the colonized can also make use of translation as a way of maintaining their distinct cultural identity. This is what Rafael describes as being the case in The Philippines, where the Tagalogs resisted the Spanish attempts to establish a hierarchy of languages (Latin-Castillian-Tagalog) and a corresponding hierarchy of societies (the Roman Catholic Church-Spanish society-native Filipino society), by marking the differences separating them from the Spaniards. Thus whereas translation can indeed be a tool with a strong political dimension, it is not an unambiguous tool since it can serve both the dominators and the dominated: the first by creating a certain transparency, which -it should be noted- always favours those with power, since the model to which conformity is required for transparency to exist is their own, and the second by preserving the other as other, the structures of colonization as external, imported and historical. Thus when France dominated Europe at the beginning of the eighteenth century, translations into French often tended to naturalize foreign texts to as great a degree as possible, and translation coincided with French imperial destiny and designs, conquering foreign parts and constantly extending the realm. In the late-twentieth century, however, France's role in the world has changed, and translation into French now has a quite different function: that of preserving the French language and culture, rather than of confirming and extending their dominance. In both cases translation involves a hierarchy and relations of power, but these relations involve at different moments in time the interests of different groups.

Let us now turn to some examples of translations into French published in the eighteenth century.

Translation in Eighteenth-Century France
In the prefaces which customarily introduce their work, translators in eighteenth century France often attempt to account for what they have produced by situating the translation in terms of historically and contextually determined criteria. The translation will thus, for example, be deemed "faithful" to the original text and "useful" to its potential readers, and if criteria such as "fidelity" and "utility" might at first seem transhistorical in nature, it should be noted that what is understood by each in fact varies with context. In eighteenth-century France such criteria are indeed constantly referred to, but what is perhaps of more interest within the limits of this presentation is the emergence, for the most part after 1675, of a set of themes directly influenced by the desire to define the role of translation within the national realm. In particular, three such themes can be mentioned here: decorum and taste, the genius of the language, and foreignness. Taken together they serve to define what is French and to distinguish it from what is not; as well, they are used to determine what can and should be translated into French, serving to mark both alterity and identity. And though there may be disagreements between translators as to the way in which such criteria

should be applied, and even as to whether they should in fact be applied, the simple fact of recognizing such criteria as elements to be referred to in the presentation and justification of translations points to the role translations were believed to play in defining and reinforcing national identity.

We will now take a brief look at the first of these themes, leaving a more detailed study which would include the two others to a longer version of this paper.

By their very nature, the notions of "decorum" and "taste" imply reference to a particular context and a national norm: what is considered decorous or tasteful within one culture may not be thought to be such within another, and when there is divergence of views, translators are faced with the dilemma as to which rules to respect. As Armand de La Chapelle notes in the preface to his translation of Addison and Steele (1724): "Il y a des agrémens attachez a la Langue et au Climat qui perdent beaucoup, ou qui disparaissent tout-à-fait, lors qu'on les transporte ailleurs, ou qu'on les habille d'une autre manière[6]." Bourgoing de Villefore directly addresses the question of decorum in the preface to his translation of the speeches of Cicero published in 1731, saying that he has chosen to translate the invectives used by Cicero even if they go against contemporary French usage. He justifies his position by distinguishing between what was acceptable in Cicero's time and what his readers would expect: "C'est justement les differences de ces anciens usages avec les nôtres, qu'il est à propos de faire remarquer, comme une chose curieuse a sçavoir. Quand on produit soi-même un ouvrage, on doit écrire conformément aux mœurs de son tems et son pays; mais quand on n'est que I'organe d'un ancien auteur, il ne faut pas, ce me semble, lui prêter un langage qu'il n'avoit pas, pour adoucir ce qui nous repugne dans le sien[7]." Bourgoing de Villefore thus recognizes the gulf separating the language used by Cicero and that which a contemporary French reader would consider acceptable, but he refuses to turn Cicero into an eighteenth-century French writer. Quite different, however, is De la Motte's approach to the translation of the *Iliad*, which appeared in 1714 and in which his decision to produce a clear and precise translation which would be pleasant to read resulted in a text quite different from the original: "j'ay retranché des livres entiers, j'ai change la disposition des choses, j'ai osé même inventer[8]". And to render the translation pleasant to read, certain changes had to be made: "J'ai voulu que ma traduction fût agréable; et des-la, il a fallu substituer des idées qui plaisent aujourd'hui a d'autres idees qui plaisoient du tems d'Homere... [9]". In the name then of what a contemporary reader would expect, De la Motte has taken the opposite tact from that adopted by Bourgoing de Villefore: the emphasis is on

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[6] My translation: "There are pleasures connected to language and climate which lose a great deal, or which completely disappear, when they are transported elsewhere, or when they wear different clothes."

[7] My translation: "It is precisely the differences between these ancient usages and ours which attention should be paid to, as something interesting to know. When we produce our own work, we must write according to our era and our country; but when we are only the spokesperson for an ancient author, we should not, I believe, give him a language he did not have, to soften what we find unacceptable in his."

[8] My translation: "I have eliminated entire books, I have changed the order of presentation, I have even dared invent."

[9] My translation: "I wanted my translation to read pleasantly; and to arrive at that end, it has beer necessary to substitute ideas which please today for other ideas, which pleased in Homer's time."

the reader rather than on the author or the text. The same dichotomy can be found on the question of "taste", on whether translated texts should reflect the expectations of their readers. Le Vayer de Marsilly, in his translation of Montemayor's *Diane* published in 1735, opposes "faithfulness" and "taste", claiming that the first leads only to a lack of interest on the part of the reader, whereas taking the second into account ensures the translation's success: "Accomoder un auteur au goût de la Nation pour laquelle on traduit, c'est avoir soin de sa gloire[10]." Etienne de Silhouette puts forwards a different point of view, however, in "Sur le Goût des Traductions", which precedes his translation of Alexander Pope's Essays on Man and on Criticism (1737). There he argues that a translation should not hide differences between nations, but rather make them known: "Une traduction ne doit jamais déguiser le goût et le caractère des ouvrages d'une nation; elle est imparfaite si elle ne met le lecteur en état de les connoitre et d'en juger. [...] La traduction de ces Essais demande qu'on se transporte quelquefois d'esprit en Angletene pour certaines idées, expressions et comparaisons dont la délicatesse d'un goût trop rafiné condamne la singularité, ou qu'elle exclut de parmi nous aux dépens de la force et du vray[11]." But as Armand de La Chapelle, in the work already cited, points out, this is perhaps too much to expect of either English or French readers, who are unwilling to accept anything which does not conform to national standards of taste and decorum: "Ces deux Nations (England and France) s'aiment tant elles-mêmes, qu'il ne leur reste presque point d'estime pour les étrangers. Leur amour propre est quelque fois si visible, qu'elles en deviennent insupportables a leurs Voisins. Chacune est entêtée de son Goût et de ses Manières[12]." Whatever the solution adopted to what constitute objective difficulties for translators, the simple fact of identifying the difficulty as one related to decorum and taste clearly shifts the emphasis to the criteria of the translating culture. This could only come about if a strong sense of national identity existed. At this point it is fitting to quote the following well-known passage from Nietzsche: "One can estimate the amount of the historical sense which an age possesses by the way in which it makes translations and seeks to embody in itself past periods and literatures. The French of Corneille, and even the French of the Revolution, appropriated Roman antiquity in a manner for which we would no longer have the courage -owing to our superior historical sense. And Roman antiquity itself; how violently, and at the same time how naively, did it lay its hand on everything excellent and elevated belonging to the older Grecian antiquity! How they translated these writings into the Roman present!... They did not know the pleasure of the historical sense; the past and the alien was painful to them, and as Romans it was an incitement to a Roman conquest. In fact, they conquered what they translated, -not only in that they omitted the historical; they added also allusions to the

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[10] My translation: "To accommodate an author to the taste of the Nation for which one is translating is to ensure his glory."

[11] My translation: "A translation should never disguise the taste and character of the works of a nation; it is imperfect if it doesn't enable the reader to know and judge them [...] The translation of these essays requires that at times we be transported in our minds to England for certain ideas, expressions and comparisons whose singularity is condemned by a delicate, over-refined taste, or which it excludes from our shores at the expense of forcefulness and truth."

[12] My translation: "These two Nations are so enamoured of themselves that they have almost no esteem for foreigners. Their pride is at times so visible that they become unbearable to their neighbours. Each stubbornly believes only in its taste and its customs."

present; above all, they struck out the name of the poet and put their own in its place -not with the feeling of theft, but with the very best conscience of the *imperium Romanum*[13]." At the turn of the eighteenth-century translation in France was also largely a form of conquest, and alterity served merely to confirm what was considered characteristically French. Difference was either transformed into identity or, if maintained, acted simply as a foil in terms of which the French defined themselves.

Conclusion

My attempt here has been to demonstrate the necessity and value of an historical approach to translation, of an approach which replaces translation in its sociological, cultural and historical context. To translate a text is to transform it, but such transformation is regulated rather than free, and the criteria determining the acceptability of the changes brought by the translator need always to be contextualized. An examination of these criteria can provide access to what defines a nation or culture at a particular moment in time, all the more so since translation necessarily requires that nations and cultures be positioned in terms of each other. What sort of transformation does the other undergo? Is alterity recognized and maintained? -these are questions which an historical approach to translation can attempt to provide an answer for, questions which are still of great importance for us in this time of the resurgence of nationalism.

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[13] Nietzsche 1960, pp. 115-16.