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Compte rendu

Anthony Pym. *Negotiating the frontier: Translators and intercultures in Hispanic history*. Manchester: St Jerome, 2000. XII + 265 p.

CERTAINLY, A BOOK OF INTEREST for a broad spectrum of readers, among them (as is my case) those with a liking for the history of translation and of cross-cultural transfers, particularly in medieval and Renaissance Spain, a land of cultural, linguistic and political boundaries, no doubt, at least since Roman times. Not in vain have there been moments in that history in which translators have worked from or into seven different languages used in the peninsula: Latin, Arabic, Hebrew, Castilian, Catalan, Galician and Aragonese. A book where the author unfolds a historical sequence of cross-cultural transfers, tracing its development from the first 'school of translators' in Toledo in the 12th century to present-day university courses in Translation and Interpretation, from King Alfonso X the Wise to the poet Rubén Darío, from the friars who evangelized the New World to the Barcelona Olympic Games in 1992, from the 16th century religious exiles and their biblical versions to the translated anthologies at the beginning of the 20th century... As Pym states in the very first paragraph, "our case studies will go from the twelfth-century Christian, Islamic, and Jewish exchanges right through to the not unrelated complexity of today's translation schools in Spain". And all well basted and tacked up with interpretations of the cases he studies, where he tries to show, quite ingeniously at times, how throughout the centuries many of those 'facts of translation' have been the final outcome of interactions, intermediaries, mediated understanding, and negotiation strategies and processes at both sides of Spain's cultural (i.e., religious, political, academic and linguistic) frontiers.

Preceeded by a theoretical introduction ("Why translators", "What is an Interculture", "Intercultures and Frontier Societies", "Negotiating frontiers"...), the book comes divided into 12 chapters, separated by a short *entr'acte* into two main periods: Chapters 1-6 dealing with the Middle Ages, 12th to 15th centuries, and Chapters 7-12 devoted to the 16th and 20th centuries, with the following outline in its *contents*, *arguments* and chapter headings:

Besides discussing translations and translators from the 12th to the 20th centuries, the book also deals (this being perhaps its main merit) with the daily paraphernalia of people, things and circumstances involved in this art and craft, as well as with the ill-intentioned pettiness that has often surrounded it: the reader will find here a whole array of patrons, abbots and rabbis, Jews and Christians, gold, parchment and the manufacture of paper (a whole chapter), state-financed translation teams, rhetoric and metalanguage in the 15th century, *conversos*, Protestants and debates during the Council of Trent, Étienne Dolet and Victor Hugo, the Catalan *Generalitat*, the Inquisition, TV networks and "idle teachers of languages other than English...".

A book, in short, rich with data, also with anecdotes, which turn its reading into an exciting journey, never tiring or boring, back to the past of translational activity in the Iberian peninsula. My personal welcome, then, to books like this: besides shedding new light on old themes and topics, they add fresh and stimulating points of view.

So much for a first reading and a general overview. The book also presents, however, some specific problems, for what I have said till now also encompasses the weak points and dark side of the book. A second, more leisurely and unhurried reading of these pages does restrict everything said so far to much narrower confines, because the volume lacks more than it appears to at first sight and the reader soon discovers the limits and limitations of Pym's study.

Three years ago, for instance, Clara Foz published *Le traducteur, L'Église et le Roi* (Foz 1998), a book afterwards translated by Enrique Folch into Spanish (Foz 2000). Like Pym's first three chapters, Foz's book is also a study of translators and translations in Spain during the 12th and 13th centuries (in fact, that is its subheading, "La traducción en España en los siglos XII y XIII". But whereas Foz limits herself to known facts and data, and hardly ever comes down to lucubrate about them, this new book, by contrast, is an interpretation of a small part of those same facts and data; and as such, at a distance (in some chapters) of eight, seven, six or five hundred years, it is an interpretation which is necessarily replete with guesswork and sheer speculation. The reader will find a good sample of such speculation on the final pages, 30-33, of the first chapter, with its 15 *would*'s, 5 *perhaps*'s, 6 *probably*'s, 4 *might*'s, 2 *imagine*'s, and 2 *hypothetical*'s, besides a heavy dose of such other restrictive terms as *apparently*, *possibly*, *likely*, *apparent*, *suppose*, *may*, and so forth. Another sample can be found on pp. 88-89. It is rather difficult to build up and uphold any theory, hypothesis or speculation on so many conjectures, or with such conjectural language. As the author himself admits at the very be-

ginning of his study, "the negotiation model may prove to carry so many presuppositions as to be non-enlightening in many cases" (p. 10). It may, indeed.

On the other hand, in the long history of translation there have also been many other cases and *frontiers* in addition to those mentioned by the author. As far as I know, the first translation by a native of the peninsula belongs to the beginning of the 5th century, in the year 416, when the priest Avitus rendered into Latin the Greek account of how the tomb of Christian protomartyr St. Stephen had been discovered a year earlier. Since then, almost sixteen centuries have elapsed and along that vast span of time frontiers of various types have come and gone, with the evident consequence that Pym's book leaves too many gaps unexplained: Ripoll & Vic in the 10th century, Ramon Llull in the 13th and 14th centuries, the 'school' of translators of the Marquis of Santillana (a keystone in 15th century Castilian culture), the whole of Spain's 17th, 18th and 19th centuries(!), and above all today's linguistic and political borderlines between Castilian on one side and Galician, Basque and Catalan on the other, a situation that is giving rise to hundreds of translations every year, many of them self-translations, the latter being perhaps the most significant translational phenomenon in present-day Spain. It is true, as stated on p. 12, that the author has sought "merely to delve into particular cases". Even so, one cannot but wonder why some cases have been selected and others have been left out. Perhaps, who knows, they are only gaps to be filled in a second volume. The raw material is just there.

Among the things to be corrected in a second edition, a few errata in proper nouns (Quev*a*do, p. 179, Alph*u*nsis, p. 29, Era*m*sus, p. 165, Lupi*l*us...), and in particular the date of publication of *Don Quixote*, which was not 1613 (p. 179) but 1605, first part, and 1615, second part (1613 being the year in which Cervantes' collection of short stories, the *Novelas ejemplares*, appeared in Madrid).

Postscript: Let me profoundly disagree with almost everything the author says (pp. 226ff.) about Valentín García Yebra. In my opinion García Yebra has been a pioneer scholar of Translation Studies in Spain and in no way deserves the critical animosity one finds in those pages or the terms used by the author referring to him ("prickly desire", "personal authority", "astute middle course", "peculiar silences", "reasons that were never clearly expressed"...)

Bibliography:

Foz, Clara. 1998. *Le traducteur, L'Église et le Roi*. Ottawa: Presses de I'Université d'Ottawa.

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