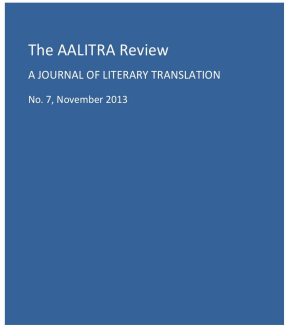

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The Mirror and the Image: Translating the Translator

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Abstract

Literary translation is often regarded as a derivative process involving copying the source text to produce a target text which is a poor reflection of its source. Translating is deemed to involve very little creativity on the part of the translator compared to the original act of authoring. Yet, translators such as Felstiner can feel that translation has emulated the original creative process so closely that the demarcation line between the two processes has become blurred to the point of suggesting the illusion that the author translated the translator.

This article explores the relationships between the authoring and translating processes, on the one hand, and the source text and the target text, on the other, using the metaphor of the mirror as an exploratory tool. The constraints, in terms of both content and form, under which the author and the translator must operate are not dissimilar. The processes show remarkable similarities too in terms of the resources used (language, culture), the progression from the invisible author's intention to its "derivative" representation as a text (source / target), and the multiplicity of possible readings, including some the author may be unaware of. Far from being a poor copy of the source text resulting from the translator's attempt to reflect it, the target text is one possible representation of the author's intention. Both the author and the translator end up as reflecting mirrors capturing this invisible intention to turn it into a visible image: the text offered to the reader.

The bibliography on all aspects of translation has become overwhelming in just a matter of years. Yet, in spite of the fact that Translation Studies is now normally accepted as an academic label for what has clearly become a very specialized subject, it is still commonly believed that translation is little more than the process of looking up words in a reasonably comprehensive dictionary. The worrying thing is that this belief is still common even in academic circles – whatever might be thought of Translation Studies as a discipline in its own right. This is not the case, of course, in the growing number of departments specifically dealing with translation at undergraduate or postgraduate level, but it certainly is in traditional literary departments, where an original text is usually held to embody a set of values which will only be debased by any attempt to translate it into another language. Or rather, the original text itself will not be debased because it will continue to exist, but the translation will only be a poor reflection of an original masterpiece, a reflection which has come into being as the result of the purely mechanical task of turning over the pages of a book which gives in one language the "translation" of a word which had been written as a component of another language. Moreover, the translation is the humble work of someone who can "copy" but not "create". The result of this attitude is that "an article in an obscure theoretical journal can be ranked as superior to a translation of a work by Pushkin or Dante" (Bassnett 173).

Yet, paradoxically, it is a well-known fact that translation is practically as old as speech and that, since human beings began to speak, the need for translation, written or oral, has been strongly felt not only because of the need to know what people who speak a different language are saying, but also because it has been a human instinct to mistrust people who speak in a way we do not understand. One only has to remember that the word "barbarian" and its cognate in other languages (French "barbare", Spanish "bárbaro", etc.) ultimately comes from the ancient Greek βάρβαρος, initially meaning "foreigner" but, via "somebody who speaks in an unintelligible

way", gradually acquiring its meaning of "uncultured, brutish". The negative connotations are clear in St Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians: "Therefore if I know not the meaning of the voice, I shall be unto him that speaketh a barbarian, and he that speaketh shall be a barbarian unto me" (Corinthians 1:14; King James Version). The uneasiness felt as a result of being in the company of a person whose language we do not understand and who does not understand our language – communication, therefore, not being possible – is also a familiar feeling. St Augustine referred to this in a well-known passage of his *De civitate Dei*:

> For when men cannot communicate their thoughts to each other, simply because of difference of language, all the similarity of their common human nature is of no avail to unite them in fellowship. So true is this that a man would be more cheerful with his dog for company than with a foreigner.
>
> (St Augustine 861)

It has become a truism to state that civilization has only been possible because of translation, an activity which has increased over the years. We only have to think of the enormous amount of translations published every year, beginning with the multilingual publications of international organizations such as the United Nations or the European Union, and ending with the editions in different languages of the winners of literary prizes. Translators themselves have certainly gained in "visibility" since 1995, when Lawrence Venuti published his well-known book on the subject; it is now very unusual not to see the translator's name mentioned, sometimes even on the front cover, and this increased interest in the personality of the translator has brought with it a new focus of attention. Translation specialists now try to resort to the so-called Think-Aloud-Protocol, which is an attempt to describe the processes that go on in the translator's mind as the final version of the target text takes shape. In other words, translation as process rather than product is seen as the best way to achieve a proper understanding of what translation means. However, this seems to involve a rather complex problem in that it cannot be easy – perhaps it is not even possible – to establish a meaningful distinction between the mental processes of the translator and those of the author. Inevitably, the mental processes that lead to a final text, source or target, involve two crucial aspects which apply both to the writer of a source text and to the writer who will write the target text: one is the constraints which condition their work; the other is the degree of creativity that must go into their respective jobs. The problem is to try and define the precise meaning of these two concepts and, moreover, how equally or how differently they apply to both author and translator. In the introduction to their co-edited book on literary translation, Jean Boase-Beier and Michael Holman point out this difficulty:

> There are two assumptions that people commonly make when they speak of translation in contrast to original writing. One is that the translator is subject to constraints which do not apply to the original author. The other is that the act of translation is by nature less creative than the act of writing an original work. Things are not quite so simple, however. The nature of creativity is in itself a very complex matter […]. In the absence of suitable tools for measuring creativity, the assumption of differences between original writing and translation is often based on little more than an intuition that translation is derivative in a way original writing is not.
>
> (Boase-Beier and Holman 1-2)

But for one thing, surely translation can also be seen as the final version of a text which went through a similar process when the writer was *creating* it first and when the translator was also *creating* it later. In a sense, the original writer had to begin by translating his/her thoughts and feelings into words, and almost certainly this meant rethinking and rewriting many sentences, varying the choice of words; a process which is obvious in those cases where more than one draft exists, or where we have only one draft, but with corrections and amendments added by the

author. In fact, there are cases where more than one version is publicly available because after publishing a first edition, the author published one or more editions incorporating a number of changes. A good example is Washington Irving and his *Tales of the Alhambra*, published in 1832 as a collection of thirty-one tales and legends, and published again as *The Alhambra* in 1851 as a collection of forty-one tales. "Most tales were rewritten, and only ten of them seem to have been reproduced with no changes with respect to the first edition" (Merino 93). Moreover, in many cases it is well known that the author is only satisfied after having written four or five drafts; Günter Grass is a good example (Coromines i Calders 17). An experienced translator, Suzanne Levine, has referred in very precise terms to this process of struggling in order to reach what both author and translator leave as a "final" version:

> I observed that the dilemma of one word versus another was not a problem unique to translation. The original writer constantly chooses words and phrases, compelled by intuitions and reasons that often have more to do with language than with his own intentions […]. The original is one of many possible versions.
>
> (Levine xiii)

That last sentence is another way of saying that the original text is still open to variants, and I shall come back to this question shortly. For the time being, let us remind ourselves that, whatever version the translator has to translate (usually the author's final draft), the first stage will be a very close reading of the source text, so close that the translator will inevitably become aware of things like connotations or ambiguities that the author him/herself probably never noticed. Good writers, however, are very conscious of the subtleties of language, and this explains why Jorge Luis Borges is supposed to have said to his translator "Don't translate what I've written but what I wanted to say" (in Pontiero 305); or why Umberto Eco should mention that sometimes, when looking at a foreign translation of one of his works, he realizes that his original text has "potentialities of interpretation" (*potenzialità interpretative*) of which he himself had been unaware (Eco 15); or why, since 1978, every time Günter Grass publishes a new work (or revises an old one), he arranges a meeting with his translators in order to discuss the original text and its potential translation problems (Coromines i Calders 21-22). On the translators' side, Suzanne Levine has devoted a whole book to a description of what is entailed in working with the author of a text to be translated: a kind of symbiosis is established between author and translator in the course of discussing the source text and its possible translation. Another experienced translator, Peter Bush, has written about the various drafts he prepares, adding that he usually sends his final draft to the author (Bush 27-28).

Translation specialists – above all, those who are translators themselves – coincide in seeing an original text as one of the "many possible versions" mentioned by Levine and the translated text as one of the many rewritings that might have been reached by the writer of the source text:

> "Translation", then, is one of the many forms in which works of literature are "rewritten", one of the many "rewritings". In our day and age, these "rewritings" are at least as influential in ensuring the survival of a work of literature as the originals, the "writings" themselves.
>
> (Bassnett and Lefevere 10)

As a matter of fact, it is not only professional translators who feel no doubt about the intimate relationship between original and translation; authors who are also translators know very well the difficulties of trying to establish a source text and a target text on clearly differentiated levels. Carol Maier has concluded that, for a number of reasons, "the effect of translation has been probed more deeply by creative writers who are also translators" (Maier 10), and one need only refer to the well-known views of Octavio Paz in this regard:

> Traducción y creación son operaciones gemelas. Por una parte [...], la traducción es indistinguible muchas veces de la creación; por otra, hay un incesante reflujo entre las dos, una continua y mutua fecundación.
>
> (Paz 23)

> [Translation and creation are twin undertakings. One the one hand […], translation is often indistinguishable from creation; on the other, there is a constant ebb and flow between both, and an endless and mutual fertilization.]

While it is true that a translated text may be "indistinguishable" from its original, it is also fair to accept that the translation automatically gives the author of the source text an *alter ego*, another personality reflected in a text which, paradoxically enough, is different while remaining the same. Cécile Cloutier (203) was right in saying that to be translated means "être multiple, s'échapper de soi-même, couler de sa propre personnalité, devenir la source de possibles inconscients" [to be many people at once, to escape from oneself, to slip out of one's personality, to become the source of possible subconscious processes], but this is characteristic not only of the translation but also of the original text – which brings us back to Levine's "many possible versions". As for the translator, he or she has no option but to adapt and modify aspects of the source text which simply belong to a different system of coordinates; however, the presence of the author of the original discourse is still felt to the point, in extreme cases, of hindering or even preventing any adaptation or modification (Tricás 517).

So, any translation is inevitably one possible interpretation of the original text, but this fact, together with the "endless and mutual fertilization" that Octavio Paz established between source text and target text, means that, rather than being interchangeable, one of the texts leads to a better understanding of the other. George Steiner is to be taken perfectly seriously when, commenting on good translations, such as Jean Starr Untermeyer's English translation of Hermann Broch's *The Death of Virgil*, he says that the translated text becomes "in many ways indispensable to the original" (Steiner 337).

It would clearly be an oversimplification to describe the relationship between a source text and its corresponding target text in terms of a metaphor which evokes the original writing as a mirror and the translation as the image reflected in it. But is this because such a metaphor would invert the terms of reference? Is the translation to be seen as a mirror that reflects the original text? Surely we are dealing here with something much more complex than that; something, perhaps, like two images reflecting each other, although this is not easy for many reasons. To begin with, both the original writer and the translator work with the same tools, namely language and all its expressive resources: "[t]hey process the same raw material, words" (Pattison 91). But then, how possible is it to translate meaning? Strictly speaking, how possible is it to *express* meaning? In a well-known essay on the possibilities of translation, José Ortega y Gasset refers to this problem as follows:

> el hombre, cuando se pone a hablar lo hace *porque* cree que va a poder decir lo que piensa. Pues bien; esto es ilusorio. El lenguaje no da para tanto. Dice, poco más o menos, una parte de lo que pensamos y pone una valla infranqueable a la transfusión del resto.
>
> (Ortega y Gasset 143)

> [when man begins to talk, he does it *because* he believes that he will be able to say what he thinks. However, this is a deception. Language does not go that far. It says, more or less, part of what we think and presents an insurmountable barrier to the rest.]

Ortega y Gasset was very familiar with the German philosophers and linguists who expressed this view one century earlier. Among them, Wilhelm von Humboldt noted that words are only a poor reflection of thought, that by the same word people do not necessarily understand exactly the same thing, and that, although words are but a poor reflection of concepts, concepts cannot avoid being transmitted by means of words:

> The *word* is the individual shaping of the concept, and if the latter wants to leave this shape, it can only find itself again in other words. Yet the soul must continually try to make itself independent of the domain of language, for the word, after all, is a *constraint* upon its ever more capacious inner sensitivity, and often threatens to stifle the most individual nuances thereof by a nature that in sounds is more material, and in meaning too general.
>
> (Humboldt 92)

It has often been said, at least since Humboldt, that different languages can be seen as a collection of synonyms, but we also know that there is no such thing as perfect synonyms in any language, and so it follows that there cannot be perfect synonyms across languages. Much the same can be said in respect of cultures: since a given language reflects a given culture, two different cultures could also be seen as "synonymous", in the sense that they may be very similar, but never exactly the same. We can accept that language and culture go together, and that translation implies translating both language and culture, but we cannot ignore one of the two components to the extent of saying that "[t]ranslating means translating cultures, not languages" (Ivir 35).

Let us, then, state that, primarily, we translate from one language into another, knowing that occasionally, but inevitably, we shall have to add or subtract information because of different grammatical structures, different cultural connotations, or simply because of the usual polysemy of words, rarely, if ever, replicated by words in another language. Interestingly, the polysemy or connotations of words may not pose any problem when it is a matter of choosing the target text word which shares the denotational meaning of a given word in the source text, but the connotational meaning – which works at a subconscious level with readers of the original text – will be lost and exchanged for a new one. To give just one example, as a result of the usual phenomenon of totally different etyma finally converging into one and the same form, the Spanish word "romero" means both "rosemary" and "pilgrim". Which of the two English words is to be used in a translation will be made clear by the context in which "romero" appears; what will not be possible is to find an English word which in itself (i.e. out of context) can mean either "rosemary" or "pilgrim".

Although polysemy and connotations may pose a practically insoluble problem, the translator, as we know, is a "specialized" reader who has to begin by making sure that he/she has perfectly understood the original text without missing any of its connotations – connotations of which, as we know, the author may not have been aware. Yet sooner or later the translator, because he/she is also a writer, will write something the connotations of which he/she will not be aware of. How, then, can the reader of a translation be sure that "meaning" has been accurately translated? The misgivings in respect of language itself, as expressed by writers such as Humboldt and Ortega y Gasset, together with the possibilities – or lack of them – of correct understanding, have been summed up by Anthony Pym in a philosophical approach to translation:

> No text can give all the information necessary for its complete rendition; all texts are thus to some extent open to competing interpretations. The question then becomes how, and with what degree of confidence, one can presume to have understood that which is to be translated.
>
> (Pym 27-28)

But, once we accept the (unconscious) difficulties the original writer may have had in expressing him/herself properly, the more or less conscious difficulties the translator may have had both in understanding the source text and in translating it, and the same problems of understanding that we have to postulate for readers of both source text and target text, we end up in a vicious circle or with a subject which would have to be discussed as part of the philosophy of language.

In view of my analysis thus far, I would suggest that there seems to be little doubt about the fact that both original writers and translators go through very similar, if not identical, mental processes in their search for the written production of a finished work. And it should be added that statements in respect of translations acting as a complement to a source text, or in respect of the elusiveness of meaning, have become usual among translation specialists (cf. Cloutier and Levine, above). Lawrence Venuti has also spoken about the constraints that condition the work of both author and translator:

> Both foreign text and translation are derivative: both consist of diverse linguistic and cultural materials that neither the foreign writer nor the translator originates, and that destabilize the work of signification, inevitably exceeding and possibly conflicting with their intentions. As a result, a foreign text is the site of many semantic possibilities that are fixed only provisionally in any one translation.
>
> (Venuti 17)

The semantic "destabilization" of the written text will ultimately put the translator in a greater dilemma than is the case with the original author because of the insoluble problems of connotations and polysemy already mentioned. Simply the choice of words is an example of the instability of the translated text because, as we know, two different translators may come up with two different, but valid, translations. Enrico De Angelis, discussing the problems of literary translation, has put this characteristic in very precise terms:

> E cosí abbiamo già due problemi. Il primo è che la traduzione varia a seconda dell'interpretazione, mentre l'originale resta identico pur prestandosi a più interpretazioni. Insomma l'originale varia restando lo stesso, mentre la traduzione varia variando. Il secondo è che di fatto la traduzione può variare perché i sistemi di partenza e di arrivo non sono gli stessi.
>
> (De Angelis 165)

> [And so we come across two problems. The first is that the translation varies depending on the interpretation, while the original remains the same, although allowing of more interpretations. In short, the original varies while remaining identical, but the translation varies by varying. The second is that, in fact, the translation can vary because the departure systems and the arrival systems are not the same.]

In fact, it is precisely because "the translation can vary" that it is to be seen as one more variant of the source text. A striking example of the extent to which a translation may end up as simply another (final) version of the original text is to be found in John Felstiner's translation of Pablo Neruda's *En las Alturas de Machu Picchu*. After long and detailed research into Neruda's life and work, and after having written his translation, Felstiner wrote a whole book trying to explain the translator's struggle to convey the intended impact of the original text. It is fascinating to read how the translator had become so totally immersed in his work that in the end he no longer felt sure which was the image and which was the mirror; in other words, which was the original and which was the translation. Reading the source text aloud to himself, he concluded: "I am astonished to find that somehow it now sounds like an uncannily good translation of my own poem" (Felstiner 199).

It is obvious that Felstiner knew which was the original and which was the translation, but we can easily understand that, since he was so immersed in both the source text and the target text, there must have been times when a conscious effort was needed to establish which "version" had come first. What is clear is that the translator had to think very hard, and for a long time, before finalizing his version. And it should be noted that if we do not know exactly what mental processes take place in the translator's mind until he/she makes a final decision, the same lack of knowledge applies to the mental processes that take place in the writer's mind until a final version is reached – a "final" version which, in actual fact, may eventually turn out to be "temporary". In both cases, all we really know is the finished product; something which, after all, reinforces the similarities between writer and translator.

If to translate is never to say the *same* thing but, in Umberto Eco's words, to say "almost" the same thing (*Dire quasi la stessa cosa*), surely this applies to both source text and target text because, just as the translation says "almost" the same thing as the original, the original says "almost" the same thing as the translation. Source text and target text complement each other. Individually, they are two final versions of the same thought; together, they are a sort of initial draft and final version. Both of them mirror and image. And the image is no less than the reflection of two writers who have become one.

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