

Ethics, Aesthetics and *Décision*: Literary Translating in the Wars of the Yugoslav Succession

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Résumé de l'article

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Ethics, Aesthetics and *Décision*: Literary Translating in the Wars of the Yugoslav Succession

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RÉSUMÉ

Cet article examine, du point de vue participant-interprète, comment les questions de loyauté, d'éthique et d'idéologie conditionnent l'action d'un traducteur littéraire. On y présente une étude de cas des dilemmes et décisions socio-éthiques de l'auteur lorsqu'il traduisait la littérature bosnienne, croate et serbe en anglais pendant les années 1990. Celle-ci vise à contribuer à l'historiographie socioculturelle de la période autant qu'à illustrer comment un traducteur littéraire pourrait agir dans un milieu de conflit socio-culturel aigu. Ensuite les observations fournies par l'étude de cas sont utilisées pour explorer les caractéristiques du traducteur littéraire comme acteur textuel et social. On y voit plusieurs implications clés qui résultent de «l'autonomie contrainte» du traducteur littéraire. Celles-ci comprennent les considérations suivantes: chaque acte de traduction a des répercussions éthiques et sociopolitiques; une partialité basée sur la conscience des exigences de la toile sociale élargie est souvent plus convenable que la neutralité; les structures de pouvoir dans lesquelles le traducteur littéraire agit valent souvent plus que la langue cible ou la stratégie de traduction en soi pour déterminer les représentations de la culture source; les facteurs de temps, de charge de travail et de hasard pourraient aussi y jouer un rôle; et le besoin de faire face à l'*indécidabilité* de Derrida est une caractéristique qui définit l'autonomie du traducteur.

ABSTRACT

This is a participant-interpreter study of how issues of loyalty, ethics and ideology condition the action of a literary translator. A case-study is presented of the author's socio-ethical dilemmas and decisions while translating Bosnian, Croatian and Serbian literature into English during the 1990s. This aims both to contribute to the socio-cultural historiography of that period and to illustrate how a literary translator might perform in settings of acute socio-cultural conflict. The case-study observations are then used to explore the nature of the literary translator as a textual and social actor. The "constrained autonomy" of the literary translator is seen as having several key implications. Among these are: that all translating acts have ethical and socio-political repercussions; that partiality informed by awareness of the demands of the wider social web may often be a more appropriate stance than neutrality; that the power structures within which the literary translator acts are more important than target language or translating strategy per se in determining source-culture representation, and that time/workload/chance factors may also play a role here; and that confronting Derrida's *indécidable* is a defining feature of translator autonomy.

MOTS-CLÉS/KEYWORDS

literature, ideology, ethics, deconstruction, conflict

Introduction

The last decade and a half of the twentieth century saw a rapid and radical transformation of the European political space. The most traumatic of these transformations was that of former Yugoslavia, where a complex of extreme nationalist agendas and brutal anti-secessionist campaigns resulted in the deaths of a quarter of a million people and the expulsion of many more (for overviews, see e.g. Woodward, 1995; Silber & Little, 1997). Inevitably, the violent redrawing of political frontiers in the ex-Yugoslav space in the 1990s went along with an equally violent redrawing of cultural frontiers (Wachtel, 1998) – a process often informed by ethnically exclusive nationalisms which attempted to harness all aspects of culture to the greater glory of the *narod* (the people, the nation). But cultural frontiers are not mere abstracts – they run through people. Thus many former Yugoslavs have found their complex, multi-rooted identity forced into a dour monoethnic straitjacket (Miočinović, in press), or have found their cultural and personal loyalties painfully divided. Nevertheless, as the wars now begin to recede into the past and the new frontiers become taken for granted, there are gradual but increasing efforts to rebuild trust and reopen lines of cultural communication between states and communities in the region.

Before the mid-1980s, Yugoslavia was well-known internationally for its vibrant literature, much of whose strength derived from the variety of the cultural, historical and linguistic roots that fed it (see for example Miočinović, in press). The languages of the former Yugoslavia, however, are not widely read outside the region – even the most widely-spoken cluster of dialects that used to be known as Serbo-Croat and which I now call Bosnian¹-Croatian-Serbian. This means that the literary translator played, and still plays, a prominent role in communicating that literature to the wider world.

Literary translators, however, are not only textual communicators: they are also individuals with relationships, loyalties and political/social ideologies of their own. Thus translators from the literatures of former Yugoslavia have not been immune to the fragmentation of personal and cultural loyalties, the need for socio-political commitment and the fact of hard ethical choices which the citizens of that region have had to face. The core of this article, in fact, is a case-study which explores how these issues affected the actions, states-of-mind and rationalisations of one literary translator out of Bosnian-Croatian-Serbian during the wars of the Yugoslav succession and its aftermath.

From a translation-studies viewpoint, though there has been much recent debate on the socio-ethical implications of literary translation (e.g. Venuti, 1995, 1998; Pym, 1997; Von Flotow, 1997; Zauberga, 2000; Davis, 2001; Munday, 2001: 126-160), the main focus has been on how translators transform text. The social action of literary translators, however, is often not only textual. It may also involve representing source writers and their culture – e.g. by working with the source writer and source-language informants, writing translator's introductions, negotiating with publishers, arranging readings, etc. (Jones, 2000). Nevertheless, there has been relatively little discussion by translation-studies scholars of the socio-ethical principles underpinning literary translation as *both* textual *and* extra-textual action (*pace* Pym, Zauberga, *ibid.*), especially in terms of how they might affect real literary translators

attempting to navigate real social contexts. Hence the present article also aims to further this discussion.

This study, therefore, has two purposes, which correspond to the two main sections which follow. The first is to contribute to the cultural historiography of 1990s ex-Yugoslavia (cf. e.g. Ali & Lifschutz, 1993; Cohen, 1998) by giving a first-person eye-witness account of how I, as an English-native literary translator from the region, attempted to navigate the conflicting claims of ethics and aesthetics, of personal and political loyalties during that time. Many of the issues I describe are known all too keenly by my fellow literary translators from the region, and some will almost certainly have bearing on the literary translator's experience in situations of inter-communal conflict and reconciliation elsewhere.

The harsh light of conflict, however, also illuminates some crucial social, ideological, ethical and interpersonal considerations which apply to literary translation in general, but which might otherwise remain unnoticed by the translator as subject. Thus my second aim is one of translation theory: to draw out these wider considerations within a framework which constructs the literary translator as a textual and social actor. Key questions addressed here are:

- To what extent can literary translators be seen as autonomous actors within their social and interpersonal setting?
- What implications does the case-study have for issues such as translator neutrality, translator power and translator ethics?
- What particular socio-ethical and ideological concerns are raised by the case-study, and how might these be resolved?
- How might power-structures of cultural representation condition the literary translator's action?
- Should irresolvable issues such as conflicting loyalties and "undecidable" decisions be seen as peripheral or central to any model of translator action?

The underlying framework within which these questions are set – that of the translator as textual and social actor – draws partly on "mainstream" areas of literary translation studies. One is that of translator creativity, where the debate is not so much about whether translators have independent creative rights and powers, as about what the nature of these rights and powers is, and what constrains them (Beylard-Ozeroff et al., 1998; Boase-Beier & Holman, 1999; Hermans, 1999; Chang, 2000). Another is that of recent debates in post-colonialist and feminist translation theory which take as their basis the notion that translating, like writing, cannot take place in a socio-ethical void, and that translators therefore need to be aware of their role within wider social structures of representation, ideology and power (e.g. Venuti, 1995, 1998; Von Flotow, 1997; Zauberga, 2000).

I also draw on fields less commonly applied to literary translation. One is that of social-role and game theory, which defines and describes the various types of "go-between" role in social interaction (e.g. Goffman, 1970; Bailey, 1970; Goffman, 1971), and which Wadensjö (1998) uses to model the work of the community interpreter as a textual-social mediator. As I argue elsewhere (Jones, 2000, 2002), this can also model the role of the literary translator as a mediator between writer, publisher, readers and other involved parties. Another key theoretical strand is the ethics of deconstruction, as applied by Campbell (1998) to the Bosnian conflict of 1992-1995 and its representations outside the conflict zone itself, and by Davis (2001) to the act

of translation. Two aspects are particularly useful to the present model. The first is deconstructionism's focus on "the call to the other" as a definer of human identity (Lévinas, in Campbell, 1998: 173-176; Derrida, in Davis, 2001: 92), a call which is an imperative but also an impossibility, because the other is both ultimately unknowable and multiple. This encapsulates the fact that the identity of the translator, as go-between *par excellence*, is dependent on others – such as the source writer and his/her enthusiasts and detractors in the source culture, the translator's helpers and informants, target-culture publishers, readers and critics. But it also shows that the needs and wishes of these others can be impossible ever to determine fully, and may even clash – and the site of the resulting conflict is the translator's identity. The second key aspect is that of Derrida's concept of *décision*, which grounds the insoluble dilemma (*indécidabilité*) as a defining feature of human decision-making (Campbell, 1998: 184; Davis, 2001: 51). This is of particular relevance to the case-study which now follows, where, as we shall see, overt conflict between the translator's others brings one translator face to face with particularly sharp dilemmas.

Case-study: a literary translator in 1990s ex-Yugoslavia

Participant observation and objectivity

In this section, I provide my own narrative as a "participant-interpreter" (Campbell, 1998: 43-44) – i.e. as a literary translator from Bosnian-Croatian-Serbian during the conflicts of the 1990s and their aftermath. Before we start, however, some methodological caveats are in order. Firstly, the fact that I am both research subject and researcher makes it difficult to claim objectivity in my description of internal psychological states. Participant observation can be a powerful research tool – but it can only achieve the externalisation necessary to interpret social-psychological events and roles, and generalise from them, if participant observers recognise their non-neutrality and incorporate it into their analytic method (cf. Holliday, 2002: 145-173). Secondly, when describing social relations, especially contemporary and recent ones, and especially ones of social division and conflict, there is no objective, Olympian vantage-point for the interpreter to occupy anyway. As Campbell argues in his review of English-language accounts of the Yugoslav break-up (1998: 53-78), observer-interpreters of contemporary events are also players in what they describe, for they shape the ground on which action or inaction takes place; and, in some views of historical method, even eye-witness accounts are shaped by narrative structures which witnesses use to make sense of what they tell (ibid: 40). Thus – as the opening paragraphs of this essay will already have made clear – I am patently not neutral in my account of external events and social relations, nor can I be. Thirdly, I am aware that wounds are fresh and deep in the region I describe. If any insensitive views or over-simplistic ideas on my part rub against wounds which the reader might have, I apologise for them in advance.

Background: literature, culture and the wars of the Yugoslav succession

It is worth starting with a sketch of key literary/cultural aspects of the Yugoslav break-up, for the wars of the 1990s ex-Yugoslav region were also culture wars, where cul-

tural issues both informed ethno-political goals and were pressed into their service (Wachtel, 1998). In these wars, the key goal of the most aggressive nationalisms (primarily those of Serbia and Croatia, though none are completely innocent here) was one of cultural dominance – at its most extreme, taking the form of culturicide, as expressed in the dynamiting of mosques and the “other side’s” churches, or even the deliberate destruction of whole historic town centres. Conversely, this means that the struggle for survival in the face of nationalist aggression (real or perceived) has also been seen by all parties to the conflict as a struggle for cultural survival.

These wars have also partially been literary wars. Firstly, because literature and nationalism are often closely intertwined – a phenomenon by no means unique to ex-Yugoslavia. Thus some roots of nationalism lie in literature – the Kosovo legend, for example, is originally a literary phenomenon.² Conversely, the manipulation of literature often plays a crucial role in the process of ethno-national identity formation by generating “pseudo histories” that create or reinforce national mythologies (Hudson, personal communication; cf. Banac, forthcoming). Thus what Banac (forthcoming) calls the construction of “the distorted and misconstrued past of nationalist ideology, with its stress on the continuity of victimhood and redemption, loyalty and treason” is enabled and reinforced in the case of Serbia (to continue the previous example) by the input of the Kosovo epics. And in any case, literature, as a key element of culture, inevitably gets drafted into any manufactured clash of cultures such as those manufactured before and during the break-up of Yugoslavia.

Moreover, literary figures have been deeply implicated in the most recent outbreaks of extreme nationalism. One of the key acts that prefigured the break-up of Yugoslavia by giving respectability to nationalist particularism was the 1986 draft Memorandum by the Serbian Academy, with the novelist Dobrica Ćosić as a prime mover (see e.g. Woodward, 1995: 71, 78); and two of the unholy trinity of Serbian Četnik leaders in the Bosnian wars of 1992–1995 (Radovan Karadžić³ and Nikola Koljević) were also, respectively, a published poet and a professor of literature. This has led to the particularly unpleasant paradox of culture-creators instigating culturicide. Thus Karadžić and Koljević, in ordering the 1992 incendiary bombing of Sarajevo’s National Library and Oriental Institute, did not so much try to impose “their” literature on others, but rather presided over the destruction of all literature, including their “own” Serbian literature stored in the National Library.

More recently, especially after the imposition of peace treaties and the death and removal of arch-nationalists Tuđman and Milošević respectively, there are signs that the nationalist wave (at least in its most extreme form: cf. Cigar, 2001) is beginning to subside at governmental level; and the voices calling for cultural cooperation across and within the new borders are becoming heard with more and more respect. Nevertheless, despite the best efforts of a committed and growing minority, in those territories which have been under the sway of extreme nationalist regimes there is a long way still to go before tolerance of other ethno-cultural groups and their world-views is the rule rather the exception among the population at large.

Personal history

It also would be useful to provide a little background to myself as subject. After several teenage holidays spent with ethnic Hungarian friends in the Vojvodina region

of Serbia, I studied Serbo-Croat language and literature as part of my undergraduate degree in the UK. I then spent a year (1978-1979) as an exchange student at Sarajevo University, where I began translating the works of the Bosnian poet Mak Dizdar and the Serbian poet Ivan V. Lalić. These two poets have formed the mainstay of my literary translation work since then (Lalić, 1997; Dizdar, 1999), but I have also worked with other poets from the region, such as the Croat Drago Štambuk and the Serb Vasko Popa (Jones, 1994; Popa, 1997). More recently, I have become involved as a translation editor with the Sarajevo-based network International Forum Bosnia,⁴ whose aim is to rebuild cultural and academic bridges in the ex-Yugoslav region (e.g. Mahmutćehajić, 1996; Lovrenović & Jones, 2001).

Literary translation and cultural-political loyalty

Let us now turn to the case-study narrative proper. As may be deduced from the personal history above, my main identification before the wars of the country's break-up was with Yugoslavia as a multi-cultural space, though with Bosnia and Serbia in particular. Nevertheless, during the Serbian (and later Croatian) onslaught on the emergent state of Bosnia and Herzegovina, my political loyalty lay with the latter. This loyalty was prompted and conditioned by four factors.

Firstly, like many foreign observers, I felt that *not* taking sides for Bosnia would simply have been immoral in the face of the brutality of the assault on the country, its people and its culture – a feeling strengthened by the fact that I had lived in Sarajevo for a year and thus felt considerable personal loyalty to the Bosnian cultural space. Thus I saw my translating of Bosnian and Herzegovinan literature – for example, the works of Mak Dizdar, a poet of major European stature – as an attempt to defend Bosnian and Herzegovinan culture by valorising it in the eyes of the outside world. And this motive – translating as an act of loyalty – has remained even in peacetime.

Secondly, my own idea of the culture I saw myself as trying to defend was far from neutral. I saw Bosnian and Herzegovinan culture as a complex and nuanced space whose vitality was (and is) based on an interplay between conflicting and common world-views, experiences and readings (Lovrenović, forthcoming), rather than the simplistic notion of separate “Bosniak” (i.e. Bosnian Moslem), “Croat” and “Serb” cultures which the nationalists were trying to promote. Thus translating Dizdar's *Stone Sleeper*, for example, implied supporting Dizdar's act of constructing a Bosnian identity through the country's medieval past – an identity (that of the heretic faithful, persecuted but impossible to exterminate) that is both uniquely Bosnian and applies equally to all its present-day inhabitants (Buturović, 2002):

You know nothing about my wealth
 Hidden from your mighty eyes
 (You don't know that fate
 Has deemed
 And dealt me
 Much more
 Than
 You
 Surmise)

You've decided to root me out at any price
 But nowhere will you find the real road
 To me
 (from "Roads," Dizdar, 1999: 25)

Moreover, this act of defence or "ambassadorship" (Jones, 2000) did not only mean relaying a positive image of Bosnian culture. It also meant trying to combat negative images in the West of Bosnia as victim or Bosnia as a place of aggression and intolerance – images inevitably generated when media pictures of massacre and mayhem are followed by Western government and UN pronouncements about the impossibility of intervening between "warring factions" who were "all guilty" (cf. Cigar, 1998; Young, 2002). I felt that it was important to attempt to redress the balance by conveying an alternative image through translation – the image of Bosnia as a country with a high literary culture which could rank with any other in Europe.

A fourth aspect of this cultural-political engagement also meant stepping outside the realm of "high literature." During the war against Bosnia, I and many of my fellow translators felt there were not only literary images, but opinions and eye-witness reports which had to be transmitted urgently to the outside world, either by translating them directly or by editing translations made by source-language natives. Among my examples were the philosophical and political essays and newspaper columns of Rusmir Mahmutćehajić (e.g. Mahmutćehajić, 1996), which promoted inter-ethnic tolerance rooted in a shared religiosity as the unifying Bosnian idea, or the first memoirs from the *etnik* concentration camps (Bosnević, 1993).

Using the metaphor of translation as cultural/political defence, however, begs the question of defence where, against whom, and to what effect – otherwise it is no more than an intellectual conceit, offensive to those who did more concrete, physical acts of defence. In the literary and political translators' case, the place was primarily "the outside world," especially Western Europe and North America, where governments were striving not to intervene in the face of mounting evidence of genocide and culturicide (Cigar, 1998; Young, 2002). Here, translations, their publication and their public reading can probably best be seen as part of the gathering of popular pressure (small in comparison to the TV images of shelling and massacre relayed nightly into people's homes, but no less real) that eventually resulted in the USA's about-turn towards intervention in 1995.

But of course, though Western inaction before 1995 and its corollaries – support for an arms embargo and partition-based peace treaties – generated guilt through complicity, the prime agents of destruction were the campaigns of the nationalists and the views that underlay them. Here, it might seem that translation out of the language of the aggressors and victims can achieve even less. Nevertheless, validation via translation in the eyes of the outside world, especially through a world *lingua franca* like English, can provide the integrative model of Bosnian culture with an additional means with which it can try to win support or cement alliances – as happened through the distribution of the Dizdar translations via embassies and at inter-government meetings, for example.

Nowadays the physical fighting has stopped in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the state's independence (albeit flawed by partition) is guaranteed by an international military and civil presence. Nevertheless, though crude nationalism is no longer respectable at official level, there is still a way to go before its ideas can be exorcised

from many people's minds: indeed, exorcising these ideas is a key priority for many Bosnian intellectuals. Thus I have still felt the need to defend and promote the complexity and potential for tolerance in Bosnian culture, both via literary translation and the translation editing of works and discussions promoting inter-communal/non-particularistic dialogue. But this again begs the question of what a literary translator can achieve here. Again, the answer is: not much alone. But if the translator is part of a wider drive for tolerance and for the rebuilding of cultural and intellectual contacts (as promoted, for example, by International Forum Bosnia), this wider drive may well have a chance of success, no matter how gradual.

Conflicting loyalties

So far, I have focused on loyalty towards Bosnia. Anti-nationalism, however, does not only mean defending the side one believes in – which is where my decisions became less easy. As a translator of South Slav (not just Bosnian) literature, even during the early 1990s, I felt that taking sides *for* Bosnian literature and culture should not mean that I was taking sides *against* literature written in Croatia and Serbia. That would have been ideological reductionism, falling into the nationalists' trap (at least, so my rationalisation went) – and thus I kept working with the Serbian and Croatian poets mentioned earlier.

Another reason to keep working with poets from throughout the Serbo-Croat region, even in the darkest times of the conflict, paralleled that mentioned earlier for Bosnian culture. This was the wish to defend a broad "post-Yugoslav" culture against simplistic cultural constructs which I saw as prevailing in the wider world – constructs which fit with a wider stereotype of the Balkans as Western Europe's uncivilised other which Todorova has labelled "balkanism" (1997: 3-20). Here the media images focusing on war and intolerance (concentration camps, shelled buildings, massacres and refugees) were usually well-meaning in their defence of the injustices committed against the Bosnians and the Kosovars. The cumulative picture they risked giving, however, was that of the ex-Yugoslav region as *tamni vilajet* – a "dark province" of ancient hatreds and nothing more.⁵ This, I felt, should be countered by reminders that the region was also one of high culture, not merely one of victims and executioners – a region, like Bosnia itself, whose cultural richness I saw as stemming from the very diversity and complexity that the nationalists wished to expunge.

The question that one must ask here, however – and that I often asked – is whether it was ethically right for a translator to take such a stance at that time. In the early 1990s, nationalist agendas underpinned by notions of cultural exclusivity and superiority in Serbia and Croatia were powering, as I saw it, a drive to wipe out the culture and population of Bosnia. Seen in this light, might an Olympian stance of pan-Yugoslav fairness not be an act of hypocrisy or blindness as reprehensible as my government's insistence that aggressor and victim were equal? The following paragraphs detail the ethical, psychological and affective dilemmas which questions such as these generated.

To begin with, I feared that the publishing of my (and other translators') Serbian translations abroad might be propagandised by the nationalist regime in Belgrade, which was desperate for all the international credibility it could get – tempered by the fact that this may equally well have offered support to non-nationalist Serbian

intellectuals. On a more personal level, there was the dilemma of whether to continue working with living writers of excellent texts (and/or personal friends) who supported or failed to oppose regimes which I felt to be hateful (a similar dilemma to that faced by many citizens of former Yugoslavia). My approach here tended to be: stay true to the texts, for that's where the writer speaks to the world (after all, there are examples in Anglo-American literary history as well of good poets having bad or ill-informed views).

A more dangerous issue arose when the very imagery which I was translating was used by nationalists to justify a campaign of hatred and genocide. An example was that of the Serbian atavistic images explored in Vasko Popa's *Uspravna zemlja* and *Vučja so* (Popa, 1973, 1980), such as the Kosovo myth or the figure of the wolf as tribal totem. When writing these poems, Popa was *positively* exploring his cultural roots, seeking pan-human archetypes through cultural particulars, in an age (the 1970s) when such explorations were relatively untainted. But a translator publishing in an age of rampant nationalism cannot claim the same innocence. Thus my editing/translating of Popa's *Collected Works* (Popa, 1997) might have been seen as giving credibility (slight, perhaps, but no less slight than my earlier claim that I was defending Bosnian culture) to the murderous misuse of such imagery by Serbian nationalists: the Kosovo defeat of 1389 feeding a desire for revenge against the Bosnian and Kosovar Moslems six centuries later, for example, or White Wolves (*Beli vukovi*) supplying the name for an anti-Muslim death squad.

Alternatively, this imagery may risk reinforcing negative stereotypes of the region among an English-reading public – thus, for example, giving the impression that Popa was a narrow-minded nationalist. The *Glasgow Herald* review of Popa's 1997 *Collected Works* (Bold, year unknown) is telling here. Though Bold's text and the picture caption stress that "Serbian nationalism [...] has been synonymous with everything Popa opposed," the article is dominated by a large photograph of a forest of hands giving the Serb nationalist three-fingered salute – and images speak louder than words.

Publication in such cases, therefore, has its dangers. But what is one to do, as a translator – refuse to participate, or try to halt publication? Or is one then falling into another of the nationalists' traps, by agreeing that everything ever produced by a culture was produced for the greater glory of the *narod*, without room for alternative motives and readings? In the end, a key reason that I did *not* break with Serbian and Croatian poetry was that it would have meant breaking personal ties built up over many years. I tended to be very wary of building up new ties, however, except on the rare occasions when I felt that my translation work supported some sort of opposition to the nationalist mindset – as, for example, with an English-language issue of the Belgrade women's journal *Pro Femina* (Slapšak, 1997).

Conflicts of quality

Occasionally I found myself asked to translate poetry that I found rather sub-standard, but from a culture I feel I had to support. In retrospect, the choice seems relatively simple: refuse to translate, for a poor poem makes propaganda against its culture, not for it. Usually I did refuse – but was left with a sense that I should have supported, if not a culture, then a person with a message to tell. Sometimes, however,

socio-political loyalty outweighed artistic judgment, as with my decision – when the outlook looked most dire for the Bosnian state – to translate an allegory (Latić, 1993) of the war against Bosnia:

[...]
 Beside a thorn tree, all alone,
 a roe-deer grazed, not yet full-grown!

 Lovely it was, like a gift only dreamed,
 this pastoral scene – a wonder it seemed
 and yet it was smashed by a frantic roar,
 setting a pack of hounds on her spoor!
 [...]

A related issue – again, thankfully rare – was whether I should attempt to improve the literary quality of verse which I felt was worth translating for other reasons. The translator's default ethic of neutrality says one should translate a "not good, not bad" Bosnian poem, for example, into an English poem of similar quality. But if one's purpose is to further a cultural-political ideal, could strict neutrality not be seen as equally unethical? In actual fact, I often did improve such texts, but within clear limits, i.e. changing style but not content, turning obviously awkward or simplistic source-text phrasing and poetics into more stylish English phrasing and poetics, but leaving the central image and its development for the judgement of the target readers.

Conversely, one might ask whether verse of similar quality in support of a destructive ideology or by an evil poet should be *downgraded* in translation. Such a descent, however – from promotion to smearing – would have been an ethical step too far. Moreover, the only reason I had for translating such work was to inform about "the other side." Thus, when Chris Agee, while writing the introduction to his edited collection of modern Bosnian poetry *Scar on the Stone* (1998), asked me to translate a poem by Radovan Karadžić in order to understand what sort of a poet could order the burning of libraries, I translated exactly what I saw. This – a second-division rather than fourth-division poem, moderately competently constructed round a rather soulless central conceit in an idiom thoroughly in keeping with contemporary South Slav poetics⁶ – gave more telling insights into the character of the man (a moderately skilled opportunist in search of an identity, perhaps) than simple demonisation as "bad poet" would have given.

A coda to the issue of text quality is the fact that native-English-writing translators of Bosnian-Croatian-Serbian are very few in number. In my experience, this has two main consequences. Firstly, I have had to refuse many translation requests out of simple pressure of work and time. Conversely, when it comes to another role of many literary translators – that of spotting and supporting good up-and-coming writers, some may get overlooked. Thus, for example, when acting as an advisor and poetry scout for Chris Agee's *Scar on the Stone* collection, I only came across the work of two younger-generation Bosnian poets when it was already in press – Nermina Kurspahić and Jasna Šamić, excellent poets who would also have helped equalise the gender imbalance in the collection (e.g. Šamić, 1986; Kurspahić, 1999).

At this point, it is important to reintroduce the issue of researcher reflexivity. This case-study has described a number of dilemmas and the routes which I chose through them. It is worth pointing out, however, that most of the latter were simply

that: routes rather than intuitively satisfactory solutions. Even after I had taken a decision, a sense of inner conflict often remained. Thus, though I have tried where possible to take the necessary analytic distance in this article, the choice of case-study examples and the discussion that follows inevitably also reflect an affective drive to reconcile the dilemmas experienced and routes chosen with my political/ideological views and my persona as a translation professional.

Implications: translation as social/ethical action

Translators as social players

Given this final proviso, it is now time to step back from the personal and to examine what wider implications this narrative might have for the role of the literary translator, both in and beyond times of overt social conflict. To begin with, what *is* a literary translator? The person in the street would probably regard a translator as someone who simply enables a reader to experience a foreign-language text; and most literary translators, including myself, would almost certainly regard the core of their professionalism as the duty to transmit the source text as accurately as possible. Translators are also social beings, however, as the present study has acutely highlighted. The very definition of “translator” presupposes at least one social other: the person who produces the source text. Thus, as this case-study has shown, personal relationships with source-text writers can be a powerful factor in shaping the literary translator’s social action. Translators’ identities and acts are also shaped by their wider social context: “the translating subject is constituted in a complex, heterogeneous system economic, social, sexual, racial, cultural” (Davis, 2001: 58). The present study has shown this linkage all too vividly in terms of source- and target-based cultural-political factors.

However, seeing literary translators as mere relayers of source-text meaning or slaves of social context seems overly deterministic, and is at odds with prevailing models of literary translation that see the translator as a creative agent (e.g. Beylard-Ozeroff et al., 1998). The case-study indicates that the literary translator acts within a field shaped by a number of interdependent forces, both internal and external to the translator:

- **Self:** among the factors here are the translator’s own psyche, personal history and motivations, political and ideological loyalties and views, ethical principles and conceptualisation of his/her own role, preferred translating tactics and strategies.
- **Source text:** its intrinsic features, such as difficulty/“translatability” or quality.
- **Significant others:** relationships with the source writer or his/her representatives (such as widow/er, official or unofficial agents), target publishers, editors and others (cf. Bush, 1998).
- The wider **social context** within which all the above operate. Among the factors operating here are: the political, social and literary-aesthetic features of the source culture, mutual images of and relationships between source and target culture, target-culture literary norms and norms of expected translator behaviour (Hermans, 1999: 72-90; Toury, 2000), time-lapse between source and target writing, source- and target-culture literary networks, relationships between interest-groups (such as source-culture regions/ethnicities), and the real-world consequences of translator decisions.

This implies seeing literary translation as constrained but autonomous social action (cf. Boase-Beier & Holman, 1999), with translators, as they work, constantly deciding between and evaluating their own text-transformation strategies within the opportunities and constraints of interpersonal contacts and the wider social context.

But is this model of literary translation specific to social settings of acute and aggressive intra-cultural and/or inter-cultural conflict, which demand especially urgent action by the translator whilst setting severe constraints on that action? I would claim that it is not. If nothing else, as feminist and Marxist theorists have pointed out, one cannot conceive of a social setting free from inter-group conflict. In less acute settings, however, the social constraints on the literary translator's action may be less visible. This echoes Davis' claim that "full awareness [that the translator is socially constituted] necessarily eludes the translator's consciousness" (2001: 58) – though here "necessarily" should almost certainly be replaced by "in unmarked situations." On present evidence, factors in the situation become marked and thus raised to the translator's awareness when they are linked to particularly salient outcomes – such as the political survival of a source state or the international recognition of a writer. Alternatively, such factors may be consciously perceived by the translator when they conflict – such as when the translator's relationship with a source writer conflicts with the translator's own ideology.

An analogy for the constrained autonomy of the literary translator is that of ambassadorship (Jones, 2000, 2002). In the social-game model of Goffman (1970; 1971; cf. Wadensjö, 1998), ambassadors (like translators) are players whose role is defined by their relationship to other players; though they can only act within the constraints of their brief, which is to represent their "party" in the best way possible, they have to make constant decisions about how to do so. Seeing literary translators as ambassadors also highlights the fact that many literary translators do more than just translate text. As the case-study indicates, they tend to be keen advocates for their source text, their source writer and for the literary source culture as a whole. They may have webs of literary contacts in the source and target culture, they may seek out or (more often) be approached by new writers, and they may have to find and work with publishers and editors, organise readings, etc. (cf. Jones, 2000). Thus translators form a key nexus in the web of literary and extra-literary patronage which determine the reception and even the form of a translated text (Lefevere, 1992, in Munday, 2001: 128).

Moreover, the analogy of literary translation as cultural ambassadorship helps to explain two crucial findings from the case-study. Firstly, ambassadors are not neutral. This study has indicated that the ethic of neutrality between parties to the communication, which is often seen as the translator/interpreter's default stance, may not always be the most appropriate ethic for the literary translator. Indeed, partiality might often be more appropriate. Secondly, with both ambassadors and literary translators, autonomy can give power over others. This is not only the power to interpret a text how one wishes, but also to choose whom to translate and whom not to translate – the gatekeeping function of literary translation (Jones, 2000; cf. Scollon & Scollon, 1983).

Ethics and ideology

If, as a translator, one claims not only autonomy but also partiality and power, it is crucial to have an awareness of the ethical and ideological implications of one's acts – indeed, literary translators should probably be seen as subject to the same responsibilities, concerns, dilemmas and risks as original writers (Pym, 1997: 65). Thus translators need to balance “their indebtedness and ultimate ‘faithfulness’ to their own circumstances and perceptions” against the “call to the wholly other” whom they represent and who forms their identity as translators (Arrojo, 1994, in Davis, 2001: 92; cf. Campbell, 1998). Moreover, this study has shown that, if the translator's partiality and ethical considerations are to coexist, then the call to the primary other (the source-writer or source-culture) must be tempered by a constant awareness of “the other other.” In practical terms, this means taking account where possible of the interests of more parties than that of the source writer/culture. Examples of such interests might be those of related or overlapping source cultures, of other source-culture players, of target-culture players such as publishers and readers, and/or of fellow-translators and the normative frameworks they set (Lefevere, 1992, in Munday, 2001: 128; Pym, 1997; Bush, 1998; Venuti, 1998; Hermans, 1999: 72-90; Toury, 2000). Furthermore, in unmarked settings – as with the case of the translator's social embeddedness – ethical and ideological considerations may well remain below the level of conscious awareness, or not be conceptualised as ethical/ideological, until they conflict or the real-world stakes of action become raised.

The following paragraphs discuss key specific ethical and ideological issues raised by the case-study:

The first issue is that of the conflict between the calls of Olympianism and *Realpolitik*. The former argues that translators should remain true to texts that are artistically good, even in tainted social circumstances of production and reception – such as a source culture hijacked by extreme nationalism – in the knowledge or hope that the culture will recover. The latter claims that a text cannot remain separate from and thus untainted by its social context. Thus, for example, a translator should refuse to translate works whose imagery is being exploited to justify genocide, no matter how innocuous that imagery might have seemed at the time of first writing. The study did not intrinsically favour one call before the other, though it indicated that other factors in the social game, such as relationships with key players, may well be what tips the balance.

The case-study also highlighted the gatekeeping role of the literary translator mentioned earlier. Here, we identified factors which affect gatekeeping decisions beyond the obvious ones of source-text quality and gatekeeper preference: translator workload and chance factors also play a key part, crucial though such decisions may be for a source writer's career. Once more, the specific social setting – that of many source writers with words to tell the world and few translators with time to give them a voice – has highlighted translator awareness of this issue, but it is one inherent in any translating “game” in the Goffman sense.

Thirdly, a common assumption in ideology-based approaches to translation studies is that translating into English risks being an act of McDonaldization – that is, of strengthening the world hegemony of Anglo-American values at the expense of those of the source culture (Jones, 2000; Venuti, 1995; Zauberga, 2000). The present

study indicates that translating into English may equally well be a means for a “small” culture to gain a voice on the world stage (Jones, Zauberga, *ibid.*). In other words, English might enable such a culture to promote its own ideological values, even if they conflict with official and unofficial UK/US ideologies. A key example here is the translator’s drive to deconstruct the target-culture images of Bosnia as *tamni vilajet* – images constructed to justify non-intervention – and to replace them with the Bosnian state’s self-image of unity in diversity; these images were then deliberately used by other source-culture players to promote Bosnia’s cultural and political independence (cf. Mahmutćehajić, 1996). The case-study, in fact, supports Zauberga’s observation (2000) that target language is almost certainly less important in terms of a text’s ideological effect than the power and loyalty structures of those engaged in the translating process.

Another issue is that of altering source-text content, as exemplified in the case-study in the discussion about the stylistic “improvement” of Bosnian poems. In contemporary theoretical accounts, such acts of “translation as rewriting” (Lefevere, 1992, in Munday, 2001: 127-131) to conform with target-culture ideological drives and aesthetic norms are usually seen a clear breach of translator ethics – a notorious and often-quoted example being that of Edward FitzGerald’s orientalist rewriting of Omar Khayyam (*ibid.*). Thus normalising or domesticating a quirky or culturally unfamiliar source text for the sake of target-language fluency or reader-friendliness is widely regarded as suppressing source-text/source-culture identity (e.g. Venuti, 1995; Allén, 1999; Berman, 2000). And, of course, what one person sees as improvement another may see as desecration – as in the case of FitzGerald and Omar Khayyam, where FitzGerald’s tactic is now decried by translation commentators. Other views are possible, however. Certain “interventionist” branches of feminist translation theory, for example, allow the altering even of core semantics for purposes of gender ethics (Von Flotow, 1997: 24-30). Alternatively, literary translators polishing target-text poetics may be seen as performing a similar role to literary editors, few of whom would see their advice to authors as unethical; or to community interpreters working between a doctor and a refugee patient, who would see their job as to help the two parties to communicate and not merely to transpose words (Carr et al., 1997; Wadensjö, 1998). In the end, I do not claim that the stylistic editing which I carried out was necessarily the better course. However, it does show that the strategy of improvement/normalisation/domestication, ethically high-risk though it may be, need not necessarily suppress source-text/writer/ culture identity, and may even be used to promote it. Thus, in source-culture representation terms, one may cautiously conclude that the ideologies, loyalties and power structures in the wider social setting of translation (Lefevere, 1998) might again be more crucial than the translating strategy per se.

Décision

A constant leitmotiv in this study has been that of dilemmas of translator choice, where any outcome brings as many problems as it solves. Moreover, the translation-theory discussions above have often merely confirmed the existence of rival options, with no indications as to which may be the better path. A potential way out of this impasse is offered by the deconstructionist concept of *décision*. *Décision*, to Derrida, is an act that necessarily involves confronting a dilemma: “only when faced with an

impossible decision – one for which a pre-existing ‘right’ choice is not ‘presented’ – do we decide” (Davis, 2001: 51). Moreover, the fact of having to decide between undecidable options lies at the basis of the constrained autonomy that typifies all human action, including that of the translator: a “decision that didn’t go through the ordeal of the undecidable would not be a free decision, it would only be the programmable application or unfolding of a calculable process” (Derrida, 1990, quoted in Davis, 2001: 94).

Similarly, *indécidabilité* may be seen as a defining rather than an interfering factor in ethical choice. Firstly because *décision*, as mentioned, presupposes a set of potential outcomes that seem equally valid. Secondly, because, if we gloss ethical responsibility as responsiveness to the call of the other, we can never know the exact nature of that call (“Ethics would begin with the realisation that the other is [...] precisely that which exceeds my grasp and powers”: Critchley, 1999, in Davis, 2001). Thirdly, the entry of a second other, whose agenda may – especially at times of overt social conflict – oppose that of the first other, turns a simple ethical imperative into a situation of ethical *indécidabilité*: “I cannot respond to the call [...] of another without sacrificing the other other” (Derrida, 1992/1995, in Davis, 2001: 94-95; cf. Lévinas, in Campbell, 1998: 177-179).

Seen in this light, the fact of having to confront apparently insoluble textual, interpersonal and ethical dilemmas is not an aberration in the work of literary translators. It is what defines their status as creative agents rather than interlingual copyists.

Conclusion

Individuals have complex sets of loyalties – to home-town, to family, to friends, to past, to state, to faith – which (despite what the nationalists tell us) are rarely coterminous. This applies to literary translators too, one of whose sets of loyalties is to the country, culture and texts they spend a large amount of their life translating and representing. Even in “normal” times this has repercussions for how literary translators perform their identities as textual and cultural ambassadors – in terms of what they translate and how, and what they choose not to translate, and why. But in times and places of acute social conflict, loyalties clash and ethical dilemmas multiply for all social actors, including translators. This is exacerbated by specific features of the literary translator’s social role – that of cultural ambassadorship coupled with bi-cultural responsibility (towards both writer and reader, towards both source and target cultures: Pym, 1997), for example, or that of cultural gatekeeper.

There are no easy solutions to the problems outlined here. Though attempting to solve the insoluble may well be a defining feature of translator action, a principle of maximum awareness of ethical implications together with one of least harm to other players may serve as initial guidelines (“points de repère”: Pym, 1997: 69) when making hard decisions. Beyond this, however, it may be best for us, as translators, to accept the maxim that *nous avons tous les mains sales* – and the dirtier the situation, the dirtier our hands. And thus use them to do what we feel is the least wrong, so that, hopefully, the good effects might outnumber the bad.

Looking specifically at the ex-Yugoslav region, physical conditions finally seem to be returning, no matter how hesitantly, to some sort of normality. To intellectuals and cultural actors from the region, the key priority now is to re-establish an open

and pluriform model of culture within and between the ex-Yugoslav states. In this, an important concern is to link regional processes into the wider processes of European and world culture. The aim here is not only to validate and strengthen the drive towards an open and pluriform regional culture, but also so that the ex-Yugoslav cultures may continue to energise and inspire cultures outside the region. Literary translators, as part of a social web involving writers, publishers, cultural organisers, readers and other actors in the literary process, have a crucial role to play here.

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NOTES

1. For reasons of conciseness, I usually shorten the proper term "Bosnia(n) and Herzegovina(n)" to "Bosnia(n)."
2. This tells of the glorious defeat of the Serbian armies in 1389 by the Ottoman conqueror. Among the key elements are the Serbian Prince Lazar being given the choice of a heavenly before an earthly kingdom (and choosing the latter, thus bringing defeat but sainthood), and his betrayal by the turncoat Vuk Branković. It derives from the cycle of Serbian folk epics collected by the philologist Vuk Karadžić in the early nineteenth century.
3. Radovan Karadžić was particularly proud of his status as poet, and claimed kinship with Vuk Karadžić through their common Montenegrin origins (Robert Hudson, personal communication) – minor and exiguous though the status and kinship actually were.
4. Homepage <<http://www.ifbosna.org.ba:92/>>, accessed April 22, 2002.
5. The *tamni vilajet* is the folk-tale land of the dead. Its balkanist image, implying mayhem as mystically endemic to the region, was often used by nationalists to deter foreign intervention and conceal the fact that such mayhem was a deliberate tool of their policies. The writer Dževad Karahasan, however, has powerfully pointed out – in the TV panel discussion "Angažiranje i umjetnost (Engagement and art)," Sarajevo Studio 99, October 1st 2001 – that the primordial chaos of the *tamni vilajet* was the raw material from which the world was created. Thus the image can equally well construct the region's complexities and diversities as a source of creative power.
6. As the only poem ("Doppelgänger") by Radovan Karadžić included in a pre-war anthology of contemporary Bosnian poetry, it was presumably one of his best. Here is my translation in full:

I'm waiting for you beside the church.
The old bells are mute.
The raindrops beat into my silence.
Then a beggar passed by.
Like a soul back from Lethe.
Neither man nor child. But he
Resembled me.

Despite this,
In his pocket, nothing else to give.
Except a pencil to write this.

Then that vanished too.
And he passed on.
Resembling me to a tee.

And you left with him.
Splashes of rain lave
My eyes.
And peace slams down
On my darkness,
Like a stone on a grave.

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