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Beatriz Zeller

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Résumé de l'article

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On Translation and Authorship

BEATRIZ ZELLER
Literary translator

RÉSUMÉ

À l'aide des concepts de traduction et d'auteur, cet article examine le rôle du traducteur littéraire face aux forces culturelles qui influent sur l'acceptation (ou sur le rejet) de la traduction à titre de forme originale d'expression. De plus, on compare les traditions modernes hispano-américaine et anglo-américaine en matière de traduction.

ABSTRACT

Using the concepts of translation and authorship as a starting point, this article explores the role of the literary translator vis-à-vis the cultural forces that determine the acceptance (or non-acceptance) of translation as an original form of expression. A comparison is made of the modern translation traditions of Spanish-America and Anglo-America.

MOTS-CLÉS/KEYWORDS

literary translation, authorship, translator's role, translation in Spanish-America, translation in Anglo-America

The concept of authorship becomes particularly relevant when one sets out to find the reasons behind literary translation's low esteem in the eyes of North American publishers, funding organizations and, as a consequence, the reading audience of literature in translation. So entrenched is the perception of translators as agents of a writer's work in another language and so widely accepted the notion of the translator as mere conduit of a work into another language, one risks being ridiculed when suggesting that the translator's name be placed on the cover of the book alongside that of the writer of the original. In North America, literary translators are rarely seen as authors.

This Anglo-American cultural bias extends itself into all areas of book production, distribution and access. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the way translations are classified in library catalogues. There are three basic ways of accessing a book through a library catalogue. "Main entries" into a library catalogue include the book's author, its title and its subject. *Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules* (AACR), a classification system used in the entire English-speaking world, specifies that a translator cannot be an author "main entry." Instead, under rule "21.14 Translations" *Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules* instructs the cataloguer to "Enter a translation under the heading appropiate to the original. Make an added entry under the heading for the translator…" (1988: 337). The cataloguer is further instructed to enter the main entry under the original author, unless the book is one of "several" translations of the work, or is the translation of an "ancient" text. *AACR* grants other persons involved in the creation of a text author main entries. They include editors and compilers. It is entirely fitting to treat the selection and organization of a text as the sum of someone's creative vision thereby granting that person authorship. Why not grant authorship of a translated book to its author *and* to the person responsible for the

translation? The reason, I fear, is that translation is perceived as a mere transfer of an author's vision from his language into another language. It follows, then, that to information specialists translation is little more than a mechanical process. Yet nothing could be further from the experience of a literary translator.

In other cultures translation enjoys a great deal more prestige than it does in North America. Witness André Makine's *Russian Childhood* which he was willing to pretend was translated from Russian and not written directly in French in order to secure its publication in France. Publishing literature in translation in France is a natural occurrence: the *Pléiade*, France's literary canon, includes many authors of foreign origin whose works were not written in French. Another example of translation's status in Europe is that of George Faludy, the Hungarian poet who lived exiled in Canada for almost two decades. In the 1930's Faludy published his *Villon Ballads* to great popular success. He did so claiming the ballads were his translations of the French Renaissance poet. Only later did it become known that these racy, much loved "translations" were, in fact, his own poems.

A translator's work is an attempt at constantly making the linguistic and textual choices which most closely express the content and nuance of the original. Suzanne Jill Levine, author of *The Subversive Scribe*, the definitive interpretation of what it is to be translating Latin American literature today, states: "You don't translate texts, but rather you attempt to re-create contexts [...] And then there's the tantalizing question, Where does the context end and the text begin? But then again, the supposedly sacred boundaries between languages are not absolute; there are secret bonds among all languages" (Levine 1991: 4). In order to "feel" those bonds the translator must not only be conversant in the language she's translating from, she must also be a competent writer in the target language so as to be free to mold the text of the original into a new reality. The end result must be the perfect fit of two cultural contexts, made possible by the act of translating the text. To be truly effective the translator must, as Levine says in her brilliant conclusion, be free to subvert the text "through frequent violations of usage [...] through a resistance to language as useful or usual." (Levine 1991: 8). While this holds especially true for translators of contemporary Latin American literature, the concept can serve as a paradigm for a disposition towards the text which places the translator squarely in the author's place.

To create this "fit" of contexts the translator avails himself of an in-depth knowledge of the literature from which the original emanates as well as of the literature of the target language. Literary and linguistic knowledge, writing ability, but more importantly, a natural proclivity for changing and subverting the original are the translator's tools. This may help explain why so many writers have traditionally translated texts from other languages to thus offer them to their readers alongside their own writings. The translated text becomes a sort of support system, an additional context whereby the reader can enter the writer's world.

There is, I believe, an innate desire in those who trade in words to broaden our frame of reference, to find echoes beyond boundaries set by geographical and linguistic imperatives, a desire to go beyond their cultural borders or, as in the original Latin meaning of the verb "to translate", *trans-ducere*. The Argentine writer and philosopher H. A. Murena has used translation as a metaphor for movement towards the sacred:

> […] *La traducción se cumple dentro del cambio, parece confundirse a veces con él, pero es activa, hasta en las formas de aire más pasivo se esconde un recóndito impulso de voluntad. Traducir: trans-ducere, llevar mas allá. Llevar algo más allá de sí. Convertir una cosa en otra. Pero convertirla a fin de que sea más plenamente lo que era, es. Se traduce un libro de un idioma a otro para quien ignoraba el idioma original el libro, siendo el mismo, sólo ahora pasa a existir de verdad* […] (Murena 1973: 83-84)

> […] Translation comes into being inside change itself, at times it seems to confuse itself with change while still remaining active: inside the most passive forms of the air lies hidden the impulse of the will. To translate: *trans-ducere*, to take beyond. To take something beyond itself. To transform something into something else. Yet, to transform it more fully into what it was, is. One translates a book from one language into another and to the person who knew not the language of the original, the book, while still the same book, begins to truly exist only after it has been translated […]. (My translation)

Translation responds, in this regard, to a deep-seated creative need to explore new territory, while at the same time, it serves as a tool for transgression and exploration of "the beyond," that other territory whose demarcations are linguistic. In this manner, while writing performs the task of searching within oneself as well as within the cultural territory of one's own language, translation offers the double advantage of being an instrument for exploring the world outside, all the while bringing that same world in, making it exist only after it has undergone a substantial transformation. This transformation is at the root of the work of every translator.

There are obvious advantages to bringing the beyond into the fold of one's own language. Examples abound of writers who have translated foreign works and who, by making them available to their peers and readers in their own language have brought about significant new influences to contemporary Latin American literature, a field of study I am familiar with. In 1922 the Chilean novelist Augusto D'Halmar published his translation of a selection of poems by Oscar V. de Lubisz Milosz, the Lithuanian expatriate poet and mystic who wrote his entire œuvre in French. D'Halmar had been profoundly moved by the work of Milosz, a poet whom the French consider largely antiquated and are ill at ease at fitting into their modern literary tradition. D'Halmar's fascination with Milosz is obvious from his introduction to his translations of the Lithuanian poet, written in Madrid shortly before the book's publication:

> *Yo no traía, quizás, a España, sino la misión de dar a conocer este poeta que me había reconciliado con el verso, a este amigo que me enseñó la amistad. Relegándome, pues, a segundo término con mi propia obra, fuí anunciando como precursor, la buena nueva que hoy reunimos en estas páginas, y, asistido ya en mi admiración y mi cariño hacia el místico lituano por cuantos sintieron mis traducciones, puedo decir que este libro es un homenaje que le rinden sus inciciados de lengua española.* (Milosz 1953: 9)

> All I had with me when I came to Spain was the mission of bringing to light this poet who had reconciled me with poetry, this friend who had taught me how to be a friend. His giving me back my own work, resulted in my wanting to announce the good news held between these covers. Seeing my admiration and love for the Lithuanian mystic thus strengthened by those who were touched by my translations I can now say that this book is a tribute from his Spanish-speaking initiates. (My translation)

Those who were "moved" by D'Halmar's translations would turn out to be most of a generation of Chilean poets who would later change the poetic landscape of the

Spanish-speaking world. Something in Milosz's poetry obviously touched a nerve with those poets, perhaps a way of expressing an air of melancholy. When combined with the forceful, imagistic poetry of poets like Pablo Neruda or Rosamel del Valle, the result would be something entirely new and unexpected. Yet what these poets were reading were D'Halmar's translations of Milosz, not the original.

Through his masterful translations, Augusto D'Halmar was able to transform a foreign vision into something which dramatically influenced the changing poetic climate of 1920's Chilean literature. D'Halmar chose the poems he translated expertly, applying his own cultural and personal bias to give shape to his rendering of Milosz in Spanish. He transferred the French original into Spanish with great freedom, subverting the original, taking liberties which greatly enriched the text in the target language. For the best known of the poems, for example, he changed the title from *Tous les morts sont ivres* (part of the first line), to "Lofoten", the name of the cemetery in Norway refered to in the poem. More significantly, D'Halmar chose to exclude the two final stanzas of the translated poem so that the poem in Spanish translation is missing a total of eight lines. While changing the title of works is common practice in literary translation, what D'Halmar chose to do by taking out a section of the original takes the notion translation into the realm of authorship. Here are the three last stanzas in French:

Vous disparus, vous suicidés, vous lointaines
Au cimetière étranger de Lofoten
— Le nom sonne à mon oreille étrange et doux,
Vraiment, dites-moi, dormez-vous, dormez-vous?

— Tu pourrais me conter des choses plus drôles
Beau claret dont ma coupe d'argent est pleine,
Des histoires plus charmantes ou moins folles;
Laisse-moi tranquille avec ton Lofoten.

If fait bon. Dans le foyer doucement traîne
La voix du plus mélancolique des mois.
— Ah! les morts, y compris ceux de Lofoten —
Les morts, les morts sont au fond moins morts que moi… (Milosz 1958: 168)

and here, without two stanzas, is how the poem ends in Spanish translation:

Vosotros desaparecidos, vosotros suicidas, vosotras lejanas
En el cementerio extranjero de Lofoten
— El nombre suena a mi oído extraño y suave —,
¿Dormís, verdaderamente, decidme, es que dormís? (Milosz 1953: 82)

Whether the poem would sound better in the original with the final eight lines removed is a matter of conjecture. For a Spanish reader, however, it is obvious that the choice of ending the poem in a question mark is a good one. By thus raising the voice the poem ends in a mysterious yet positive note not implicit in the original, which ends in an ellipsis.

Augusto D'Halmar translations influenced Chilean letters much beyond providing the poetic means of expressing melancholy and longing. Rosamel del Valle's choice for the title and principal character of his poetic novel *Elina aroma terrestre* was obviously inspired by Milosz's poem "Lassitude":

"*Elliné, Elliné, ôtez vos mains de mon cœur!*" (Milosz 1958: 76)

translated by D'Halmar as:

"*¡Elina, Elina, quitad vuestras manos de mi corazón!*" (Milosz 1953: 97)

And echoes of Oscar V. de Lubisz Milosz can be felt throughout Pablo Neruda's powerful poems of *Residencia en la tierra*. Not just in titles which so closely resemble Milosz's (Neruda's "Fantasma del buque de carga" to Milosz's "Femmes et fantômes"), but in the *élan* that suffuses a poem like "Tango del viudo." That Chilean poets were able to assimilate the tone of a "symbolist" like Milosz to their poetic discourse, one which was transforming the influences of Cubism and Surrealism into something resolutely modern and unique in the Spanish language, is possible thanks to Augusto D'Halmar's prescient choices as a translator as well as his connectedness to the literary aesthetic which was driving that enormous poetic transformation. Although Augusto D'Halmar was a respected fiction writer in Chile in the 1920s and 1930s, his work has not withstood the test of time and his fiction was not reissued after his death. Ironically, his greatest contribution as an author were not his novels, short stories or poems, but his enduring translations of an obscure poet like Oscar de Lubisz Milosz.

Translation has no doubt influenced the course of American literature. This is especially true of poetry. Ezra Pound is the best example. Although he was a prolific translator in his own right, Pound's greatest contribution to contemporary letters was his brilliant assimilation of foreign texts into his poetry, especially the *Cantos*. Much like his contemporaries in other languages (Jorge Luis Borges, for example), Ezra Pound is an exemplar of literary transcultural travel, the ideal role of the translator. However, he took translation one step further: Pound, the ultimate subverter, was able to transform poetry in English by transferring literature (often in translation) from other cultures into his own poetry, often bypassing translation itself.

Less prolific but similar to Pound, Robert Lowell also translated works of foreign literature into English. Unlike Pound, however, Lowell stayed within the English-language poetic discourse of the period and kept translation quite outside his own writing. He called his translations "imitations", taking liberties which place him perfectly within the role of translator as writer-subverter. Not conversant in some of the languages he translated from, Lowell based some of his versions on existing translations, anathema to many contemporary translators. Yet, in so doing, he transformed the poems he translated to the point that they became *his* authorship, something he never denied: "*My* Baudelaires were begun as exercises in couplets and quatrains… All my originals are important poems. Nothing like them exists in English, for the excellence of a poet depends on the unique opportunities of his native language. I have been almost as free as the *authors themselves* in finding ways to make them ring right for *me*." (Lowell 1961: xiii; the italics are mine).

Although many of my colleagues would probably not agree with the degree to which someone like Lowell subverts the text at the expense of faithfulness to the original, they would agree that it is essential to take many liberties in order to create a text in the target language that truly speaks through our cultural context. There are many examples in Canadian literary translation which would support this argument. They include Ray Ellenwood's translation of Claude Gauvreau and Patricia Claxton's recent translation of Nicole Brossard to name but two in an ever expanding lattice of

dexterous translations from French into English in Canada. These translators' work has helped define Québec literature for other Canadians. However and notwithstanding their immense contribution to our national literature, were one to go to a library catalogue and search for their translations under their personal names as authors, the books they have translated would not turn up.

Different literatures integrate foreign influences differently. Some do it through translation, others through imitation and adaptation, yet others through a combination of the two. In all instances the translator must take the liberties of an author to subvert language in order to transfer a literary work into the cultural and textual context of the target language. A rich translation tradition exists both in Latin America and in North America. Why is it, then, that a writer like Augusto D'Halmar achieved authorial recognition as the translator of O. V. de Lubisz Milosz, while seminal works of Canadian literature in translation do not grant their translators author status? The reasons are cultural. The only way this can change is for publishers of books in English to make a radical shift in the way they treat works of literature. Translators have done all that is possible to do. In Canada we have attempted to establish authorial recognition through contract language, through the promotion of literature in translation, through tireless lobbying before art organizations. Now it is the publishers' turn. For translated works of art to make their way into the cultural context of the English language, publishers must place greater value on the transformatory power of literature, not simply see it as a commodity to be published merely on the grounds of its commercial potential. This conceptual change is necessary for translation to be valued for what it is, namely a work of art emanating from another author's context and brought into the readers' universe by its other author, the translator.

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