

TRANSLATION'S LABOURS REGAINED

Starting with the '80s, we have witnessed an extraordinary boom in translation research worldwide. Translation studies have achieved institutional authority, manifested by an unprecedented proliferation of academic training programs, professional associations, publications, and conferences. Traditional linguistics-based theories focused on assumptions of equivalence between target language and source language, and granted the source language and source text the status of being universal and stable, according to the Romantic notion of original genius and inalienable authorship. Gradually, equivalence-based theories came under attack and began to give way to function-oriented translation research, which nowadays takes into account the wider context within which translation takes place in the receiving culture. "The cultural turn" in translation studies coincides with the change of the canon in literary criticism. Both phenomena obviously belong to poststructuralist cultural practices, emphasizing the dislocations of centers and margins, plurality and differences. Translation, seen as a form of acculturation, plays an important part in the complex process of creating literary/cultural canons. Being never "innocent", translators should become more and more aware of their double power: the power of representing the source culture, and the power of manipulating the text's reception in a target culture.

Whatever prominent role – as linguistic and cultural brokers, mediators, image-makers, etc. - in intercultural transfers may translation theories grant them, translators still complain of invisibility, or a very pale visibility. They still feel marginalized and have to struggle with all kinds of textual and extra-textual constraints. Nowadays the target cultural authority is much more permissive than during the mid-twentieth century, when, for example, Robert Graves excised the homosexual act from his translation of the *Lives* of Suetonius in accordance with the Anglo-Saxon tradition (I exclude from this discussion all kinds of oppressive régimes, where censorship acts as the 'cosmetologist', according to its own rules, of any text). But, if we only leaf through the book-reviewing press, we can easily see what incredibly small space is allowed for the commentary on translations; usually obsolete clichés about translation slip easily into the very end of the book reviews, and not in rare cases the translator's name is completely absent.

I would like to leave such intensely debated topics, and note some thoughts that have been inspired by two poems.

One of my favorite poems by Robert Lowell is "Skunk Hour":

*I myself am hell;
nobody's here -*

*only skunks, that search
in the moonlight for a bite to eat.
They march on their soles up Main Street:
white stripes, moonstruck eyes' red fire
under the chalk-dry and spar spire*

*of the Trinitarian Church.
I stand on top
of our back steps and breathe the rich air –
a mother skunk with her column of kittens swills the
garbage pail.
She jabs her wedge-head in a cup
of sour cream, drops ostrich tail,
and will not scare.*

The skunks hour is before dawn, when it is still “dark night”. The image of the bold mother skunk with her column of kittens swilling the garbage pail, and eventually being rewarded with a cup of sour cream, suggested to me the translator’s struggle for existence, in obscurity, rummaging through somebody else’s words. And the translator “will not scare.” But the poet knows his own terror, he *will scare*, maybe this is one of the reasons for which Lowell never did translate other poets, but wrote *Imitations*. He pointed out in the “Introduction” to *Imitations* that the volume is “partly self-sufficient and separate from its sources, and should be first read as a sequence, one voice running through many personalities, contrasts and repetitions.” Lowell recreated poems belonging to other cultures and times, in search of a poetical voice able to reflect “the dissolution of ourselves into others, like a wedding party approaching a window” (“The Landlord” - an imitation after Pasternak).

Returning to the image of the skunks: a friend of mine told me that once he heard a famous Romanian actor shouting from a phone booth to his interlocutor: “But take care, don’t make it *stink like a translation!*” Translation stinking like a skunk! Is the translator leaving behind him a stinky trail? In a postmodern age, incorporating into the target language bits from the source language should be a part of the game. Pound, who was only a modernist, used to include idioms or phrases of the source language, translating them with high fidelity.

I would like to refer to another wonderful poem, at once a memoir and an *ars poetica*, a labyrinthine meditation on loss and recollection: “Lost in Translation,” by James Merrill. In this poem, “translation” becomes a Proustian “madeleine” which makes links with all missing or regained pieces of life’s and art’s puzzles. The poem is dedicated to Richard Howard, a prominent translator of Baudelaire, Foucault, Cioran, as well as an exquisite literary critic and a very interesting poet. The motto is from Rilke’s translation of the poem “La Palme” by Valéry. James Merrill himself translated Valéry’s poem into English.

In “Lost in Translation,” his rereading of Valéry’s poem in French makes the poet search for Rilke’s translation. The memory of the French and German poems calls up “his French Mademoiselle,” in whose care he spent a summer vacation during his uneasy childhood, and to whom he dedicated his first innocent love:

*Noon coffee. Mail. The Watch that also waited
Pinned to her heart, poor gold, throws up its hands –
No puzzle! Steaming bitterness
Her sugars draw pops back into his mouth, translated:
‘Patience, chéri. Geduld, mein Schatz.’*

*(Thus, reading Valéry the other evening
And seeming to recall a Rilke version of 'Palme,'
That sunlit paradigm whereby the tree
Taps a sweet wellspring of authority,
The hour came back.. Patience dans l'azur.
Geduld im... Himmelblau? Mademoiselle.)*

Throughout the poem, key words and images are subtly echoing of "La Palme."
"Translation" becomes a metaphor for the process of writing itself.

"Ransacking Athens" for Rilke's translation of "La Palme," Merrill evokes it with an amazing concern for detail, but, at the same time, synthesizes tons of theoretical debates on what is lost and what is regained in the translator's struggle to preserve the "underlying sense" of the original:

*..... Know
How much of the sun-ripe original
Felicity Rilke made himself forego
(Who loved French words – verger, mûr, parfumer)
In order to render its underlying sense.
Know already in that tongue of his
What Pains, what monolithic Truths
Shadow stanza to stanza's symmetrical
Rhyme-rutted pavement. Know that ground plan left
Sublime and barren, where the warm Romance
Stone by stone faded, cooled; the fluted nouns
Made taller, lonelier than life
By leaf-carved capitals in the afterglow.
The owlet umlaut peeps and hoots
Above the open vowel. And after rain
A deep reverberation fills with stars.*

A palimpsest of translation re-echoing translation – namely, past into present via art, world into art via art, art into art via art -, Merrill's poem ends with the image of a palm-tree, rustling with its angel: a "reverberation" of Jacob's wrestling with the angel in order to be blessed:

*But nothing's lost. Or else: all is translation
And every bit of us is lost in it
(Or found – I wander through the ruin of S
Now and then, wondering at the peacefulness)
And in that loss a self-effacing tree,
Color of context, imperceptibly
Rustling with its angel, turns the waste
To shade and fiber, milk and memory."*