SLT, TLT and the 'Other': The Triangular Love Story of Translation

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Abstract

Literary translation is not a scientific procedure but involves a personal initiative towards the mediation of languages and cultures. The translator's task is to determine how to change one text into another while preserving the original text's meaning. The act of negotiation between the source language text/culture and the target language text/culture requires a delicate balance, of engaging with exciting and provocative strategies of transference and language use at every turn. Having covered the whole gamut of perspectives —from the notions of 'traduttore traditore', 'invisibility' of the translator and 'transparency' of translation to the 'beauty/fidelity' and 'imaginative interpretation' debates — translation is poised at a self-conscious moment, calling attention to its 'madness,' the process of its coming into being. This paper will probe the way the new strategy of 'bringing the reader/ reviewer to the text' further complicates the tension-filled relationship of SLT, TLT and the translator.

Let me begin by invoking a metaphor for translation. There have been many such metaphors used in the past by theorists to define translation: as treachery, as parasite, as bridge and even as predator or cannibal. It has also been conceived of as friend or deliverer. For me, the act of translation seems an attempt to connect two shores or cultural continents. In the rocking boat that is buffeted by currents of theory and strategies of language use, sits the translator keeping a steady hand on the rudder of her/his vessel and trying to steer a balanced course. Just as from one day to the other the mood of the weather changes, so from one cultural moment to another the processes of writing change languages. As the moving finger of Time documents,

neither do the components of a language remain the same, nor do two cultures continue to use language in the same way. Michael Cronin notes the challenge that the translator must confront of conveying *mnemonic time* [past, historical or pertaining to memory] into *instantaneous* time [current context] (Cronin 2003: 71). What, then, urges the translator to take on the risky task of trying to find a precarious passageway between texts of two languages and two cultures and initiate a dialogue of familiarity between them spanning space and time? The answer would echo that of an adventurer who is called by the undiscovered realms to go forth and encounter and/or experience the unfamiliar, although feeling 'at sea' with the moorings severed by the already known and the already written, yet excited with the promise of possibilities, setting sail rather in the spirit of Rabindranath Tagore's Dhananjay Bairagi:

> I shall sail the seas of injury
> through the terrible storms
> in my fear-dispelling little boat … [translation: mine]

Literary translation is not a scientific procedure. It involves a personal initiative towards the mediation of languages and cultures. When making a choice, the translator invariably answers the call of certain texts. Texts have different voices. Some voices carry more appeal to a translator at a particular point of time, a certain kind of music that attracts attention and invites deeper engagement. Like being pulled inexorably by the song of the sirens, the translator-sailor responds to the secret music of texts and sets sail towards unknown shores. But yes indeed, rowing a rocking boat between two cultural shores is a complicated and risky business.

The above metaphor serves as the *leit motif* of this article. The secret pull of a text beckons the translator with the thrill of embarking upon a labour of re-familiarization with the genealogy of the chosen text. The translator may gradually be able to establish a bond with the text of the source language or SLT. This bond has generally been acknowledged to be of two types: (1) an interpretative process that a Reader-as-Translator or RAT can set into motion by a simple engagement with the text; or (2) that of total surrender to the

geist of the text by a translator who seeks its transference into another language. If the first premise is taken to suggest that all translation is interpretation and therefore translators can inflect the originals in ways unintended by the original authors, it revives the anxieties of *traduttore, traditore* debates. The second idea of 'surrender' may be offensive to some people as it seems to suggest the effacement of a person's critical sensibility and might therefore revive the debates of 'fidelity' or the 'feminization' of the act of translation [Lawrence Venuti has also taken up for critical discussion the notion of the translator's 'visibility' as a traitor/betrayer/failure and 'invisibility' as a servant when considered in relation to the SLT]. Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak (1998) enunciates two thumb rules for the latter type of relationship in her essay on 'The Politics of Translation.' She suggests that "the task of the translator is to surrender herself to the linguistic rhetoricity of the original text. …the not unimportant minimal consequence of ignoring the task is the loss of "the literarity and textuality and sensuality of writing"' (Spivak 1998: 189). Spivak's second advice is that the translator "must be able to discriminate on the terrain of the original" (Spivak ibid).

Since the trends of discussion in Translation Studies through the nineties have tried to strike a fine balance between *prescription* and *description* — theory to aid practice — it will be helpful here to dwell upon some of the points raised above since they may very well serve as indicators for translators. First, it must be accepted that the initial exploring step of a RAT towards the SLT must gradually evolve into a deeper relationship which demands the translator's surrender to the SLT. The point to remember here is that the translator surrenders to the text and not to its writer to be able to satisfactorily transfer via translation a distinctive socio-cultural world into another. In 1990, the two eminent Translation Studies scholars Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere highlighted what they termed as the 'cultural turn' as the sensitivity which had become manifest in the translation practice for quite some time [most certainly in the postcolonial ethos]. Their view was that 'neither the word, nor the text, but the culture becomes the operational "unit" of translation' (Bassnett and Lefevere 1990: 8). Their idea was hailed by Edwin Gentzler, one of the leading synthesizers of translation theory, as the "real breakthrough for the field of translation studies" (Gentzler 2001: xi). What these theorists are trying to stress is the translator's need to inhabit the milieu of the SLT. A translator

who does not become a part of the text's moment may end up with a vessel that will flounder at sea. This can and has often happened. The example that postcolonial theorists are fond of citing is the way scholars of the First World have sometimes approached the texts of the Third World. Instances of such practice are easy to find but to always view translation as an instrument of the colonizer's ideological machinery would be as flawed as to assume that a translator familiar with a text's ethos and contexts invariably succeeds in transferring the sense and the cultural specificities of the SLT into the target language. Let me try to clarify the above point by looking at some critical reviews.

While one need not cite the instances of the 'colonial', or Orientalist type of translations, which are many, there is the need, however, to acknowledge the equally numerous examples of earnest engagement with texts of the Third World by scholars of the First World which have resulted in remarkable and deeply satisfying cultural negotiations. What comes immediately to mind is the noteworthy instance of William Radice's (2004) interactive engagement with Clinton B. Seeley's translation of Michael Madhusudan Dutt's *Meghnad-Badh Kabya* when both of them were making independent efforts to translate the challenging poem. In a review essay carried in the web-zine *Parabaas*, Radice (2004) mulls the various aspects of Clinton's translation and his own and the differences between the two attempts, the differences being the function of the choices made by them during the process of translation vis-à-vis the poem's language, metre and rhythm. This is yet another example of the richness and fecundity of the SLT and the resourcefulness and the inventiveness of the translators in producing almost conterminously two versions of the same text in the target Language.

Perfectly conscious of the fact that sweeping generalizations are obvious intellectual traps, I would only like to draw attention to two more interesting discussions to continue the thread of the argument: one, by Douglas Robinson whose review essay locates Eric Cheyfitz's *The Poetics of Imperialism: Translation and Colonization from 'The Tempest' to 'Tarzan'* at the other extreme of the 'colonial' attitude in

translation and finds Cheyfitz's analyses seriously flawed by, what he describes as, the rather common view of the pre-colonial society as a utopia and translation as the colonizer's demonic tool (Robinson 1998: 63-77); two, by Ketaki Kushari Dyson (2003) who examines in an intensive workshop-like manner the volume *No Symbol, No Prayer* presenting the translation of Bengali poet Bijoya Mukhopadhyay's poems by Carolyne Wright, Paramita Banerjee and Sunil B. Ray, done in collaboration with the poet (Dyson, 2003). Dyson points out the errors/oversights in the transference of cultural specificities by the translators despite being contemporaries of the poet and aided by a native speaker of the target language [Appendix 1]. It would appear that the errors resulted from certain complacencies which more research and deeper involvement with the poems [and perhaps more humility] could have prevented. In his article, 'Perils of Translation', Tim Parks suggests that the more the translator gets to know the source culture and language, the less able s/he becomes in conveying its difference in another language. Parks feels that the 'dependence of acculturation' makes the independence of translation increasingly difficult (qtd. in Cronin 2003: 38). Dyson's study is exceptional and can serve as a manual or a practical 'handbook' — of the kind that Coetzee appreciates [see below] — for aspiring translators to illustrate the contemplation and rigour the act of translation demands.

Spivak's second advice that one should be able to 'discriminate on the terrain of the original' (Spivak 1998) actually urges the translator to exercise her critical sensibilities in the choice of the text in view of its socio-cultural contexts. Spivak's choice is Mahasweta Devi because she is 'unlike her scene' (Spivak 1998: 189) and because the motivation of Mahasweta Devi's writing is resistant to the customary social, political and economic practices of her time. Spivak explains that critical perspectives can 'radicalize the field of preparation so that simply boning up on the language is not enough; there is also the special relationship to the staging of language as the production of agency that one must attend to' (Spivak 1998: 189). The translator's familiarity with the text and the processes of its production must be

such that a critically nuanced reading would emerge as its translation. Then the possibility of coming to appreciate how translation works in specific contexts, how translation shapes cultures both at and within their boundaries, would offer a powerful motivation to push on despite the difficulty of the undertaking. This aim is potentially of great consequence, not just for Literary Studies and Translation Studies but also for the future of the cultures involved which would bring the theoretical frameworks within which translation studies are conducted and the practice of translation under constant review.

Our attention so far has been on the nature of the relationship of the translator with the SLT. Let us now look at the other shore, of the target language. It is expected that the translator is proficient in the language of transference and is sufficiently knowledgeable about the literary and cultural history. No doubt the poststructuralist notion inspired by Derridian theories that all communicative language is a form of translation in which it is an illusion to speak of the original, has problematized the role of translation. More disturbing is the contention that since each language constructs the world in a different way, any translation is bound to force the text into what Peter France describes as the 'disfiguring disguise of an alien idiom' (France 2000a). Yet a translator's task remains an attempt at an approximation of the SLT as the TLT, introducing into the latter the flavours of the SLT. In this regard, the debates over 'word-for-word' and 'sense-for-sense' style of translation have prevailed since the time of Cicero, Demosthenes and Jerome. Actually, the translator's relationship with TLT is a freer one. To illumine the case of discovering a new continent of meaning offered to the sailor-translator, one could appropriate here what Jean Genet says in *The Thief's Journal,* 'Though it was at my heart's bidding that I chose the universe wherein I delight, I at least have the power of finding therein the many meanings I wish to find there…' (Genet 2004: 5). Thus the translator can weave into the TLT the many dimensions of the SLT which her intimate relationship with the text has allowed her to discover, carrying across as much locality and specificity as she can find.

Communication is, after all, meant for some one. When there is an 'addresser,' there must also be an 'addressee' or the receptor of the communicative act. Translation is meant for the reader/receptor. Marking a radical shift in the translation theories of his time, Frederic Schleiermacher presented the translator with a rather dramatic choice: either to leave the reader undisturbed and take the author to the reader in a literalist mode of transference; or take the reader to the author by flouting the norms of the target language in a 'foreignizing' mode. This dilemma has swayed the practice of translation through the ages. For instance, while on the one hand, Walter Benjamin's 'Task of the Translator' seems to suggest that translation fails when it aims at making the communication of the meaning of words paramount, on the other hand, defending his translation of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, Vladimir Nabokov writes that ornamentation must be eschewed to give the readers a precise rendering of contextual meaning. Lawrence Venuti offers a choice to the translator in negotiating either 'domestication' or 'foreignization' as the strategy for transferring the source text into the target language.

As is clear, there can be as many strategies and points of view determining the practice of translation as translators. In the new century, having run through the entire gamut of theories and strategies, translation is poised at a self-conscious moment, calling attention to its 'madeness' or 'the process of its coming into being', as J.M. Coetzee describes:

> Translation seems to me a craft in a way that cabinet-making is a craft. There is no substantial theory of cabinet-making, and no philosophy of cabinet-making except the ideal of being a good cabinet-maker, plus a handful of precepts relating to tools and to types of wood. For the rest, what there is to be learned must be learned by observation and practice. The only book on cabinet-making I can imagine that might be of use to the practitioner would be a humble handbook.

The attention directed at the 'artifice' or the 'madeness' of translation leads logically to what Mona Baker (1998) in her editorial

remarks in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies* proposes as the catchword in current empirical research: the movement from *translational* to a more *translatorial* orientation [the concept first developed by Justa Holz-Manttari in 1984 as *Translatorisches Handeln*], which offers a function-related approach to the theory and practice of translation.

In the global marketplace, every stage of production, consumption, and dissemination contributes to the over-all quality of the product. Evidently, the process of producing a translation is a complex and fascinating one involving the negotiation between source and the target text. But the success of the process must be assessed by the consumer, who in this case is the addressee/ receptor/ reader. A reviewer-as-reader [RAR] may thus be regarded as the 'ideal receptor': 'ideal' because certain degree of competence in the subject and expertise in the process involved are taken for granted, which may not be required of any other reader. Standing apart as the 'Other' from the triangular and intimate relationship between the SLT-translator-TLT, the RAR must shoulder the responsibility of providing a balanced assessment of the entire enterprise, rather in the manner of a 'quality-control officer'. This is an extremely important role since the reviewer's assessment very often influences the general response to the product and thereby governs to a large extent the dissemination of the product in terms of its value in the marketplace.

The RAR is thus both desirable and necessary to complete the cycle of production-consumption-circulation of the translated text as capital goods. Hence, the reviewer must maintain a distanced and neutral [non-biased] stance of the 'Other'. There is, of course, every possibility that the reviewer becomes the villain of the piece, capable of souring the idyllic love story of SLT and TLT. The reviewer is of course free of all pressures and must clearly and logically articulate her/his views. However, in this context one would do well to remember Peter France's (2002b) description of translators as 'the post-horses

of civilization,' his reminder that: 'finding fault is not the main thing. It is all too easy to criticize translators for deforming, adulterating, or otherwise betraying the original, but more rewarding to seek to understand and enjoy the variety of translation projects and translation practices. Good translations are good books in their own right, not just reflections of good books' (France: http://www.oup.co.uk/academic/ humanities/literature/viewpoint/peter_france)**.** The blog-like invitation (to the seminar on whose proceedings the present volume is based – Editor) to debate 'How [not] to Review Translation' is therefore both timely and relevant for emphasizing the role of the Reviewer as Receptor whose feed-back is intended to monitor the translatorial acts of future translations.

To add a personal angle to the discussion, I can merely share the experience of reviews of my books. I take the example of a recent volume of mine which presents a composite of women's writing, theatre and translation. The contiguity of the subjects was emphasized through my long Introduction. The volume has so far been reviewed by four 'ideal receptors'. The interesting fact is that three reviewers assess it according to their own area of interest or expertise: that is, the volume as a contribution to either women's writing or theatre studies or translation scholarship – each excludes the other dimensions in considering the worth of the work. Only one reviewer [of the four] tries to synthesize all the aspects in her assessment. Though very gratifying in themselves, the reviews further illustrate the complex terrain of Receptor Evaluation and the challenging task of the Reviewer as the ideal reader.

The sea may be choppy. But travel, one must… in search of new continents and the never-ending love story.

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