

Literary Translation: Between Rendering and Transferring

Salah BOUREGBI
Badji Mokhtar University
Annaba - ALGERIA -
salihbourg@yahoo.fr

Is it easy to render a creative text from its source language to a target language? Are we able to preserve its soul and core and magnificence through our transfer? Is what we read, as a translated literature, a literature that preserves all the formulaic and thematic concerns of the original text? In other words, are we able to keep the semantic and stylistic equivalences of a translated text?

Shifting from one language to another is in itself transferring your capacity from one language to another. But such transfer of capacity affects language's innate uniqueness, because every language is identical to itself and has its own specificities that ensure this uniqueness and makes it keep its own identicalness. Languages are by definition different from one another. Though we possess languages of the same roots, they differ in branches. Thus, they become autonomous. Roger T. Bell maintains that: "To shift from one language to another is, by definition, to alter the forms. Moreover, the contrasting forms convey meanings, which cannot but fail to coincide totally; there is no absolute synonymy between words in the same language, so why should anyone be surprised to discover a lack of synonymy between languages?" (06)

There is all the time something that is lost or added during the transfer. In rendering the text to one's own language, we reproduce and probably express more than the text suggests. Thus, this act makes us betray the author and his text. What is very paradoxical in translation is that some translators lean more to translation as an end, but not as a process of transferring meaning. Such concentration on the product, more than on the mechanics of translating the meaning of the original, excludes any clear cut evaluation of translation as a product.

But does this product, made up out of transfer, really keep the spirit of the original text along with its formal as well as its semantic layers? It seems, unfortunately, that the product does not reproduce the source text but completes it, ie, it expands and makes it otherwise. In the words of Lori Chamberlain: "Translation provides a mode of living on, of survival after death, and each text contains in its form the law of that survival, a sort of DNA for its translation. Translation is charged with the restitution and growth not only of the text, but of Language itself." (435)

Is the search for origin in translation a matter of faithfulness or a matter of scientific honesty or a quest within the source text to find out what it reveals-really reveals-for us as readers and translators? Lori Chamberlain is in favour of rendering the text but not extending it beyond/over its core. He maintains:

Translation marks an acceptance of the impossibility of origins, an opening of the play between before and after, a reveling in multiplicity. While this writing is marked, then, by

its openness to play, it is not the less serious: in undermining those definitions (of truth, of authority, of originality) that have been held sacred, this writing attempts to understand both how those sacred structures insured a kind of failure (the literature of exhaustion) and how that failure might be turned into a success.”(428)

Translation is made to be a second art-an art that is begotten from another art- Chamberlain adds: “ For we accord the original author a kind of privilege, the head seat at the table, and grant the author ownership over those words, intentions, poetics.” (420)

But such ownership makes of the usurped a right and of the second art another autonomous art whose specificity is hybridity. This means that the author loses his authority over his creation. The translator expresses his thoughts and intentions, which could be more than the original. Subsequently, by colouring it this way, he makes it his own. According to Lawrence Venuti, this kind authorship carries two disadvantages:“On the one hand, translation is defined as a second-order representation: only the foreign can be original, an authentic copy, true to the author’s personality or intention, whereas the translation is derivative, fake, potentially a false copy. On the other hand, translation is required to efface its second-order status with transparent discourse, producing the illusion of authorial presence whereby the translated text can be taken as the original.” (06/7)Thus, the presence of the first author in translation is an illusion produced by a translator, who “enacts and masks an insidious domestication of foreign texts, rewriting them in the transparent discourse that prevails

in English and that selects precisely those foreign texts amenable to fluent translating.” (16-7) In the same vein, the critic Ian F. Finlay states that: ‘The translator must also have an appreciation of and feeling for different styles, tones, nuances and registers in both the source and the target languages, this assisting him in creating the mood of the original in his translation.’(04)

Since the source text is a mine of different semantic possibilities, it, thus, becomes open to many versions of interpretation. To reconstruct a text from the source is to build it through your own design, spirit and cultural background. Susan Bassnett maintains that: “No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached.” (13)

So, there is no guarantee in translation, since there is rendering, transferring and adapting. Even the effect, the text has as an original, is not the same when it becomes a target. Moreover, the reader of the source is not the same as the reader of the target: Taste differs from one nation to another and from one individual to another. Translation, then, could be seen as another version of the same text. André Lefevere and Susan Bassnett point out that: “‘Faithfulness’, then, does not enter into translation in the guise of ‘equivalence’ between words or texts but, if at all, in the guise of an attempt to make the target text function in the target culture the way the source text functioned in the source culture.” (08)

The literary text does not obey to any rule dictated by external constraints and factors, but rather it has its own autonomy and its own being. Its existence is based on some fragments of facts that it melts and fuses into one mold with the soul of its maker. Yet, this maker, who holds some cultural, philosophical motions, is hovering around and about his text-his work. So, though the text holds some social, cultural and institutional aspects of its time, it is, nonetheless, more linguistic and more suggestive. Kwaku A. Gyasi points out that: “Literature is about people, their society, their culture, their institutions. But it is also, and especially, about language, the medium throughout institutions are expressed. It can therefore be safely asserted, without any fear of contradiction, that to talk about literature is to talk about language.” (75)

So, language is a creative act of rendering, of making ‘what is’ ‘what is not’. It has many layers, which are external and internal: the former is found within culture, the latter is within its inner meanings and the author’s intentions. Such language nature makes the translator, who is willing to find out the truth and no other thing than the truth, fall in semantic paradoxes: Which truth is he willing to translate: the cultural, the textual, the intentional, or further, the personal? It is the nature of decoding that handicaps the translator. Bell maintains that: “We take it as axiomatic that language is a *code* which possesses *features*-phonological, syntactic, lexical and semantic-and that language use is made in order to create *texts* which act as adequate vehicles for the communication of meaning.” (08) Hopefully, The critic Lord Woodhouselee Tytler expects a good

translation as the one that transfuses the original so that the source reader and the target reader feel the same thing when reading both texts. He writes: “I would therefore describe a good translation to be, that in which the merit of the original is so completely transfused into another language, as to be as distinctly apprehended, and as strongly felt, by a native of the country to which that language belong, as it is by those who speak the language of the original work.” (Qtd in Bell 11)

Is a foreign language capable of rendering and preserving the meaning, the rhetoric and the qualities of the source culture? Here are some illustrations, which could be seen as parameters with which we can gauge such renderings:

The first example is taken from Lori Chamberlain’s article, “Ghostwriting the Text: Translation and the Poetics of Jack Spicer,” published in **Contemporary Literature** (2001). It is about the translation of Federico Garcia Lorca (Spanish) and its translation by Jack Spicer into English. Chamberlain finds it problematic and poses a critical dilemma. The Translated book **After Lorca** by Spicer raises a poetic problem. Lorca’s Poem “Ode to Walt Witman” is paradoxical: it holds some ‘good’ translations and some additions that are purely Spicer’s. The introduction of the book of 1957- and through the voice of Lorca-warns the reader about the transgression of the poems’ unity and semantic structure:

It must be made clear at the start that these poems are not translations. In even the most literal of them. Mr Spicer seems to derive pleasure in inserting or substituting one or two words which

completely change the mood and often the meaning of the poem as I had written it. More often he takes one of my poems and adjoins to half of it another of his own, giving rather the effect of an unwilling centaur. (Modestly forbids me to speculate which end of the animal is mine.) (“The Introduction”, Spicer: 11)

So, Lorca, himself, acknowledges such changes in his translated collected poems: There is a fake transfer from the very source. Such violation and transgression of the original text make the translator (Spicer) “as a sort of grave-robber to consult the ghost of Lorca and to reconstitute the body of the poems, not as *individual* poems, but as a language of poetry.” (Chamberlain: 427).

The interpretive poem makes us doubt about which is of Lorca and which is of Spicer. In his article “The Lorca Working,” published in **Boundary** (1977), Clayton Eshleman has established a kind of difference and correspondence between the author’s poem “Juan Raman Jimenez,” and his version in English and then Spicer’s. He finds flagrant mistranslations:

The first stanza of the Lorca original poem goes as follows:

En el blanco infinito
Nieve, nardo y salina,
Perdio su fantasia. (Lorca : 384).

The literal English translation of Eshleman is:

In the white infinite,
Snow, spikenard and saltmine,
He lost his fantasy. (Eshleman: 33).

Spicer's translation of this stanza is:

In the white endlessness
Snow, seaweed, and salt
He lost his imagination. (Spicer: 13)

According to Spicer, unlike Eshleman, to translate is to render style, self, space and soul. It is to interconnect, through these elements, the poeticalness of the poem. In a reply to Garcia Lorca, Spicer writes:

Things do not connect; they correspond. That is what makes it possible for a poet to translate real objects, to bring them across language as easily as he can bring them across time. That tree you saw in Spain is a tree I could never have seen in California, that lemon has a different smell and a different taste, BUT the answer is this—every place and every time has a real object to correspond with your real object—that lemon may become this lemon, or it may even become this piece of seaweed, or this particular color of gray in this ocean. One does not need to imagine that lemon; one needs to discover it. (Spicer: 34).

Therefore, according to Chamberlain, “Authenticity of expression, then, demands an oscillation between the ‘outside’ of the poet and language, between the objective and the subjective—between the poet and the translator, the living and the dead. The ‘real’, then, is where Spicer as subject is not; it is not something that can be represented, but it can be caught in the web of language and made thus visible.” (Chamberlain: 434) In the same vein, the critic Walter Benjamin maintains that: “Just as the manifestations of life intimately connected

Literary Translation: Between Rendering and Transferring

with the phenomenon of life without being of importance to it, a translation issues from the original-not so much from its life as from its afterlife.” (Benjamin: 71).

The second example is from French to English. Patrick Swinden, in his article, “Translating Racine,” published in **Comparative Literature** (1997), raises, equally, such difficulty of literary translation. Swinden criticizes Edmund Smith in being less faithful to original verses of Racine’s **Phèdre**: It is a hybrid half verse, half prose form. Here are Hippolyte’s love confessions for Aricie:

*Mon arc, mes javelots, mon char, tout m’importune
Je ne me souviens plus des leçons de Neptune ;
Mes seuls gémisséments font retenir les bois,
Et mes coursiers oisifs ont oublié ma voix.*
(Racine: 2.2 549-52)

Smith has extended these four verses into to sixteen:

*Come, let’s away, and like another Jason
I’ll bear my beauteous Conquest thro’ the Seas:
.....
For nobler Sports he quits the Savage Fields,
And all the Hero to the Lower yields.*
(Qtd in Swinden: 214)

Such rendering makes the context extend beyond the atmosphere and the moments of the revelation. Hippolyte is made to say more than Racine is supposed to allow him to express. In other words, the translator transgresses both Racine and his text. “While Racine’s lines describe a state of mind,” Swinden points out, “Smith’s are a variant of the Elizabethan persuasion to

love. There is no warrant in Racine for this form of address. (210)

Swinden has found out that Smith has made Hippolyte utter words that do not exist in the original. He replaces the verse “I have wholly forgotten the lessons of Naptune” with Jason, then Venus, and Adonis. This, however, has an effect of Hippolyte’s situation. (Swinden: 211)

Such blurring act of Smith makes of Racine’s text a foreign. The images used by Racine do really express the intention of the playwright and what he wants from his Hero Hippolyte. So, by substituting ‘Neptune’ with Jason, Venus and later with Adonis, Smith extends the text more than its playwright. That is, the way he dresses up language differs dialogically to the way of Racine’s. “Racine’s images,” Swinden maintains, “refer directly to objects the character is speaking about. Hippolyte really is weary of his bow, spear and chariot. By contrast we are not convinced that Smith’s Hippolitus ever blew his horn at daybreak. It is there just to acclimatize Adonis’s horn five lines further down the page.”(211)

Besides, the semantic aspect of the text, another difficult element appears. The meter Racine uses is quite difficult to adopt in English, and no alternation of meter is ever possible, except the blank verse. The latter could destroy the euphony, which is an essential legacy in poetry. Though blank verse is an option for Racine’s translation, it remains, nonetheless, inadequate: It alters the nature of effect, which balanced, and orchestrated over the harmony of meter and rhyme: prosody.

Blank verse liberates the translator of the imprisonment of the meter and the rhyme. Subsequently, rendering becomes the only means that enables him to adopt a free linguistic motion that he sees fitful to the original. Thus, unwillingly, the translator transgresses the unity of the text. James Phelan states: “Our response to language is determined by our knowledge of the linguistic system, our understanding of the non-linguistic aspects of the speech event, and at time by our encyclopedic knowledge of the world.” (80) or further in Bassnett’s words: “No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached.” (13)

Rendering, thus, liberates the translator but makes the text deviate. It becomes more than what it is—another text inspired from the original: a text from a text, and an author from an author! Mark Bevir points out that “Because the content of a work is given by the mental activity of its authors, the content of a text at any moment in time is defined by the mental activity of those individuals who have associated works with it.” (508) In the same vein, the critic Joseph F. Graham maintains that: “The author is no less beholden to the translator than the translator is to the author, and yet neither can possibly repay the other. Their texts are complementary and thereby equivalent in structure, as in reference, but not in substance or meaning.” (27) This position keeps pace with Bakhtin, who acknowledges the difficulty of detection of the author in his work. He claims that: “the author is not to be found in the language of the narrator,

not in the normal literary language to which the story opposes itself, but rather, the author utilizes now one language, now another, in order to avoid giving himself up wholly to either of them.” (314)

So, in any kind of creative writing, there is the ‘non-said’, the ‘what is not’ of ‘what is.’ There is the mask of a truth (truths), “another’s speech in another’s language, serving to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way.” (Bakhtin 324)

So, it is fairly clear that no adequate, exact translation is ever possible in literary creation. Omission and addition are a must to render and transfer the source into the target. Though we acknowledge its deviation, we, nonetheless, get something of the text that seems to be very original, yet an originality of another kind: to inject a new spirit to the original text. Without such rendering, the only way open to a foreign is to read in the original.

Works Cited

Bakhtin, M.M. **The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays**.1981. Ed.. Michael Holquist. Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holoquist. Austin: University of texas Press, 1992.

Bassnett, Susan. **Translation Studies**. 1980.London, New York: Routledge, 1991.

Bell, Roger T. **Translation and Translating: Theory and Practice**. London, New York: Longman, 1991.

Benjamin, Walter. “The Task of the Translator,” **Illumination**, Trans. Harry Zohn. NewYork: Schocken Books, 1969.

Literary Translation: Between Rendering and Transferring

Bevir, Mark. "What Is a Text? A Pragmatic Theory," **International Philosophical Quarterly**, Vol. 42, N°4 (December 2002): 493-508.

Chamberlain, Lori. "Ghostwriting the Text: Translation and the Poetics of Jack Spicer," **Contemporary Literature**, XXVI, N°4 (2001): 420-42

Eshleman, Clayton. "The Lorca Working," **Boundary**, Vol.2, N°1(Fall 1977): 28-41.

Finlay, Ian F. **Translating**. London: St Paul's House Warwick Lane, 1971.

Graham, Joseph F. "The Introduction," **Difference in Translation**. Ed. Joseph F. Graham. Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press, 1985. [3-30]

Gyasi, Kwaku A. "Writing as translation: African Literature and the Challenges of Translation," **Research in African Literature**, Vol. 30, N°2 (Summer 1999):75-87

Lefevere, André, and Susan Bassnett. "Introduction: Proust's Grandmother and the **Thousand and One Nights**: 'The Cultural Turn' in Translation Studies," **Translation, History, and Culture**. Ed. Susan Bassnett, and André Lefevere. London, New York: Pinter Publishers, 1990. [01-13].

Lorca, Federico Garcia. **Obras Completas**. Madrid: Aquilar, 1963.

Phelan, James. **Worlds from words: A Theory of Language in Fiction**. Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 1981.

Spicer, Jack. **The collected Books of Jack Spicer**, ed. Robin Blaser. Los Angeles: Black Sparrow, 1975.

Swinden, Patrick. "Translating Racine," **Comparative Literature**, Vol. 49, N°2 (Spring 1997): 209-26.

Venuti, Lawrence. **The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation**. London, New York: Routledge, 1995.