

“MAKE ME MACHO. MAKE ME GAUCHO, MAKE ME SKINNY”: JORGE LUIS BORGES’ DESIRE TO LOSE HIMSELF IN TRANSLATION

John Milton
USP

1. Foreignizing Translation

A number of contemporary translation studies critics believe that the desirable translation is that which respects the original, takes stylistic, syntactical, morphological and lexical elements of the original to the translation. It is a translation where the original is clearly visible.

This is also the site of Lawrence Venuti’s “resistant strategies that foreground the play of the signifier by cultivating polysemy, neologism, fragmented syntax, discursive heterogeneity” (Venuti, 1992:12). And Tejaswani Niranjana believes that the foreignizing translation is a way through which the post-colonial society can assert its independence.

We must respect the foreigner and the foreign; we must make him appear to the reader of the translation; we must respect the “Other”; we must not make a logocentric and ethnocentric reading of the text. But isn’t there here something a little smug in the almost wholesale rejection of facilitating and naturalising translations? The acculturating translation seems to be a thing of the past, to belong to Pope and the *belles infidèles* and the *infra dig* area of commercial translation.

But there are dissenting voices. Anthony Pym believes the whole foreignizing proposal seems to be grounded in a cultural struggle between France and Germany in the early 19th century, or rather a German answer to French supremacy. Interestingly, many of the commentators come from France or the US, today's dominant culture. Douglas Robinson comments that Berman still feels a strong sense of guilt: "*L'Épreuve de l'Étranger* fairly pulsates with Berman's troubled sense that contemporary French culture is still guilty of the German romantics' charge; the book taken as a whole might well be read as an attempt to atone for French guilt" (Robinson, 1997a:87).

2. Dissenting Voices

A number of critics have found foreignizing translation elitist. Pym says of Berman's proposals:

Un projet qui se limite à la traduction littérale des oeuvres littéraires ou philosophiques doit-il condamner pour autant tout le reste de la profession aux guillemets, c'est à dire à une pratique en quelque sorte non-authentique, dégradée par le social et par le commerce? (Pym: 9)

Venuti himself, in "Genealogies of Translation Theories: Schleiermacher", demonstrates the elitism in Schleiermacher's translation theory and in the project of the German Romantics: "Schleiermacher is enlisting his privileged translation method in a cultural political agenda wherein an educated elite controls the formation of a national culture by refining its language through foreignizing translations" (Venuti, 1991:131).

Venuti's view is that Schleiermacher and his fellow German Romantics used translation to mark out a dominant space for a

bourgeois minority in early nineteenth-century German culture. The public of this group was very much the small intellectual elite of the large towns, for whom they translated the classics avoiding language which was "alltäglich". Schleiermacher himself translated Plato; Schlegel translated Shakespeare, Calderón, Dante, Boccaccio, Ariosto and Petrarch. Venuti quotes Friedrich Schlegel's boast that "[readers] are for ever complaining that German authors write for a small circle, often in fact for themselves as a group. I find this a good thing. German literature gains more and more in spirit and character because of it" (Lefevere's translation in Venuti, 1995:133).

Venuti sees Schleiermacher as representing a Romantic expressive theory of language. The translator will capture the "spirit" of the foreign language and enable the German reader to identify with the author, promoting a personal association with the author that is more akin to Romantic individualism and fluent translation. Venuti emphasizes the importance Schleiermacher gives to the subject rather than to the text: he "psychologizes the translated text and thus masks its cultural and social determinations" (Venuti, 1995:142).

Thus Schleiermacher revolts against transparent discourse, but the foreign in the foreignizing translation he proposes is never available in unmediated form. Interpretation is always made by the translator.

But one can also criticize Venuti's own democratic credentials. In *The Translator's Invisibility*, he does make a move towards the professional translator, asking them to become more visible by using "abusive" techniques, but Venuti himself never shows interest in non-literary translation.

Douglas Robinson makes this point:

[...] this conflict is the bind in the swing of Venuti's ideological gate: how to distance himself from the aristocratic or haute-bourgeois elitism of the vast majority of foreignizers through

the ages and transform their preferred method – for so long a channel of contempt for the great unwashed, a means of regulating or even completely blocking popular access to various sacred and classical texts — into a form of grass-roots dissidence, the oppositional translator’s resistance to assimilative capitalist culture (Robinson, 1997a:98-99).

Robinson adds that Venuti never makes any attempt at connecting his theories with technical translation. He concludes by saying that Venuti fails to “inhabit the scorned subject position of the lower-class Other, whether by actually translating technical and other despised utilitarian texts himself or by exploring that possibility imaginatively – by theorizing technical translation, for example, as precisely that area where translators are most hegemonically controlled by the domesticating institution” (Robinson, 1997a:100-101).

Robinson also criticises Niranjana’s solutions. By following Benjamin’s literalism and foreignization, “the potential for creative retranslation is somewhat impoverished, largely because she has found or developed no local models for such creativity” (Robinson, 1997c:158). Secondly, he wonders how “holding back from communicating” can have a social effect such as decolonization due to the fact that communication is essential to the “spreading” of an effect (Robinson, 1997b:93; 1997c:158).

Furthermore, he criticizes Niranjana’s foreignizing translation of the Sanskrit *vacana*. He fails to see how her translation is better than more facilitating translations for the decolonization of India and how it will lead readers to social action. He questions the view of the supporters of foreignization that a facilitating translation will necessarily “dull the mind of ‘the’ target-language reader and enforce a hegemonic mindless blandness that will be increasingly blocked to cultural difference, and that a foreignizing translation will rouse ‘the’ target-language reader to critical appreciation for cultural difference” (Robinson, 1997c:161). This seems a somewhat ingenuous approach:

The fact is, the assumption that a phrase has to be alien to startle us into an awareness of alterity is grounded in a naïve realistic epistemology according to which old (or realistic, or familiar) information is always ground and new (or fantastic, or alien) information is always figured (Robinson, 1997a:95).

Indeed, foreignizing translations have clear disadvantages for encouraging direct action as their awkwardness may be associated with the authoritarian discourse of textbooks or legalese. Conversely, a direct translation of idioms such as “el mundo es un pañuelo” may make “authors, and the source culture in general, seem childish, backward, primitive, precisely the reaction foreignism is supposed to counteract” (Robinson, 1997c:162).

3. Borges, a Dissenting Voice

One dissenting voice from the foreignizing fashion is Jorge Luis Borges. His comments on translation show a desire to distance the translation from the original rather than approximate it to it. The translation should be as different to the original as possible and can even improve on it. The misquotation which forms part of the title of this paper comes from Borges’ interview with his translators into English, Ben Belitt and Norman di Giovanni. Borges insists the translators do not use Latinate terms in English but rather as much vocabulary with Anglo-Saxon roots as possible. Borges wishes to see the change in himself, he wants to be different. We see the attraction of the play, the fascination for the new clothes, which may or may not be a little loose.

Ben Belitt describes his shock when translating Borges’ poetry together with the author:

We all revised and re-revised, until there was a kind of despairing agreement or its English equivalent, on the text

which was to stand next to the Spanish. The same was true of di Giovanni's later project on Borges, we slaved at a very special genre of translation that Borges had in mind as par for the course. Of course, Borges knows better English than we do — down to its Anglo-Saxon marrow, which he especially coveted in exchange for the Latinate marrow of his own language. In the case of Borges, there was a change in the matrices of the two languages, as though he were subjecting the weight and the temper of a Spanish which he regarded as jejune, to an Anglo-Saxon decantation. If Borges had had his own way - and he generally did - all polysyllables would have been replaced by monosyllables, especially in the 3rd and 4th revisions, to which he often pressed his absent collaborators. People concerned about the legitimacy of the literal might well be scandalized by his mania for dehispanization.

Question: He was using you as his hands?

Ben Belitt: Simplify me. Modify me. Make me stark. My language often embarrasses me. It's too youthful, too Latinate. I love Anglo-Saxon. I want the wiry, minimal sound. I want monosyllables. I want the power of Cynewulf, Beowulf, Bede. Make me macho, gaucho and skinny (Belitt: 1978: 21).

The situation is comic: the elderly Argentine author who learnt English from childhood and who has had a lifelong love of Anglo-Saxon trying to persuade the American translators not to show excessive respect for his own original. The author wishes to lose himself and his original language while the translators want to maintain it. May we not have been worrying a little too much about the respect and sacredness of the original and respect for the author when this was not what he or she wanted?

Borges' longest text on translation is "Los traductores de 1001 Noches", in which he examines French, English and German translations of the Arabic original. Galland's famous French version, which has been itself translated into many other languages (including Arabic), which emphasises the colour and the magic and omits all

the lasciviousness of the original, and which has been responsible for many of the clichés about the Arab world we still have; Edward Lane’s prudish censoring version; Sir Richard Burton’s rhyming version, distributed privately, full of footnotes to display the translator’s erudition, in which he even adds many details to the original; Dr. Mardrus’ *fin de siècle* French version which exaggerates the local colour to brilliant technicolour; and finally the three German versions: Gustave Weil’s enjoyable version, with interpolations, certain omissions and certain sections in rhyme; the insipid version of Max Henning, except in the sections where he translated sections from Burton; Félix Paul Greve’s translation of Burton; and the best known German version, that of Enio Littmann, which is an accurate verse rendering of the original. No word is missed out; Allah is not changed to God; no attempt is made to exaggerate local colour; the original epithets are kept.

This is often considered the best translation of the *Arabian Nights*. But Borges disagrees. The versions of Burton and Mardrus, and even that of Galland are linked to the traditions of their own literatures and are a result of that literature. John Donne’s obscenity, the enormous vocabulary of Shakespeare and Cyril Tourneur, the excessive erudition of 16th century essayists and Swinburne’s enthusiasm for the archaic can all be seen in Burton. *Salammbô*, Lafontaine, the *Manequí de Mimbre* and the Russian ballet can all be seen in Mardrus. But noting other than the “probity” of Germany can be found in Littmann. The translator seems to have ignored his own culture, which he could have used to a much greater extent. Borges suggests he should have taken advantage of the fantastic side of German literature and wonders what a Kafka would have made of the games, the digressions, the symmetries of the *Arabian Nights*.

Borges also wonders if the simplifying and prudish versions of Galland and Lane are not nearer the original innocent tales which were adapted and more strongly seasoned for the tastes of the Cairo middle classes.

So Borges favours the version which modifies the original, acculturates it, adapts it to its own literary traditions and disfavours that which shows respect for the original.

4. Conclusions: Foreignization and Cultural Background

But isn't this preference for a certain kind of translation to a great extent connected with the background of the critic? As Pym mentions above, the German Romantics were writing against French military domination. A. W. von Schlegel gave his series of lectures in Vienna in 1808 as Napoleon was conquering Europe. Benjamin, Buber, Meschonnic and Derrida are all influenced by the sacredness of the Word in Jewish culture. Berman Laplanche and Venuti react against their own ethnocentric French or American cultures.

Borges is Argentine. His early poetry followed national gaucho themes. He then moved away from all kinds of nationalism and developed a lifelong hatred of the Peronist nationalism. Indeed, at one point the Peronists replied to Borges' taunts by naming him inspector of pig farms. In his essay "El Escritor Argentino y la Tradición" he examines the possibilities open for the Argentine writer. It is impossible for even nationalistic Argentine writers to escape European influence; many of the metaphors of *Don Segundo Sombra* come from Paris, and its narrative is derived from Kipling and Mark Twain. Borges rejects following a Hispanic model: Argentina has always tried to distance itself from Spain, and Spanish literature is a special acquired taste amongst Argentines. Another possibility is that of isolationism, which Borges finds absurd: this says that the Argentines are totally disconnected from the past and from Europe, as in the first days of creation.

Borges feels that Argentina is very much linked to Europe, and European events have all had strong repercussions in Argentina. He accepts that the Western culture is the Argentine culture, but then adds that their distance from European culture gives them a

certain ability to use and handle European themes “without superstitions, with an irreverence which may have, and already does have, fortunate consequences”. Borges makes parallels with Jews in Western culture as a whole and Irishmen in English letters: not tied by any fetters and devotion to a certain history or tradition, it has been much easier for them to innovate.

Borges does not confine this freedom to use European material to Argentine writers; it is a South American characteristic. We can link his comments to those of Brazilian critics and writers who have been faced with similar problems. The solution is crystallized in the anthropomorphic metaphor of Brazilian modernist Oswald de Andrade: European culture will be swallowed to be regurgitated in a rather different form.

Adriana Pagano describes the complex way in which Brazilian writers used translation, when analysing the use of translation by Machado de Assis. She uses the image of translation as a laboratory for the Brazilian writer in the 19th century, commenting on the large number of adaptations, imitations, translations and condensations published in *folhetins* (Pagano, 1998 :11-21). The barriers between the original and the translation have been taken down. She describes the way in which Machado uses translation in different ways. In *Crisálidas*, when the butterfly is still at the chrysalis stage, the translations that Machado makes are correct and measured. However, in *Falenas*, the period of the complete existence of the butterfly, he presents recreations, which are much less subject to the original. Like Ezra Pound, he appropriates the foreign, adapting Chinese poems through French translations and uses a translation of Lamartine’s “A Elvira” as part of another poem, “Pálida Elvira”. At a time when there was an “epidemic” or glut of translations of Victor Hugo, Byron and others, Machado presents Lamartine’s Elvira as a “pale Elvira”, an imitation of the French conventions of Romanticism, thus criticizing the convention of straightforward copying. The narrator then shows how Lamartine’s copy can be made original through critical and humourous recreation.

Sergio Bellei comments on Machado de Assis' translation of Poe's *The Raven*, published in the fourth volume of Machado's *Poesias Completas, Ocidentais*, together with translations of Shakespeare, Dante and La Fontaine. In his *O Corvo*, Machado makes no attempt, unlike Fernando Pessoa was to do later, to reproduce any of Poe's special effects. Bellei connects this with Machado's theories on the way forward for Brazilian literature. The writer in the colony can never get away from the metropolitan origins, but he can make new beginnings and try to ensure that the literature of the colony is not a mere epigon of that of the European centre. Bellei sees Machado's translation as a reification of this theory: Poe's *The Raven* is the metropolitan base on which the new literature, the translation, will be made. But it is just the base. Absolute copy of the European model, an attempt to bring the stylistic features of the original into Portuguese would thus show an inability to get away from the European norms.

And here we return back to Borges' desire to be "macho gaucho and skinny", to be completely different in translation. Foreignizing translation may reflect colonial domination; a translation need not be too respectful of the original.

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