POSTCOLONIAL (RE)VERSIONS. THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF POSTCOLONIAL TRANSLATION

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to survey the evolution of so-called "postcolonial translation" (the practice of translating minority or subaltern texts) from early autochthonous voices to the latest theoretical developments. Translating postcolonial literature raises several crucial questions: if translation is regarded as *manipulation*, then literary texts from the former colonies of Europe are subject to the same treatment. This creates the possibility that source-oriented translation strategies might counter hegemonic stereotypes through which the source, alien culture, has been represented. In other words, we are dealing with the validity of using translation as a subversive activity. Since the postcolonial condition always implies a process of translation, a dialogue between source (subaltern) culture and target (hegemonic) culture, it comes as no surprise that some of the most relevant postcolonial theorists have delved into the possibilities of translation as fertile ground for contention. I shall review the practice of what I call *re-version*, from Fanon to Spivak: the tension between "invisibility" and "presence" in translation, between exoticism and subversion. At the heart of the debate, there lies a fundamental antagonism between *nativist* and *postmodernist* positions, both with their own achievements and disadvantages (in this sense, it is possible to draw a parallel between the attitudes of postcolonialism and feminism). I shall be illustrating this with examples drawn from the works of Derek Walcott and Salman Rushdie.

To begin with, I would like to define the role of translation both in contemporary critical theory and in the practice of translating heterogeneous texts written in the English language. In the first place, much of what we could refer to as the literary experience of marginal and minority authors writing in English today is translatological. Not only translators (whose role might seem obvious but who seldom take these issues into account, as we shall see later on), but also both literary and cultural critics attach an increasing importance to the role of translation as a necessary, theoretical framework and field of reference for English writing. In an age when texts written in English but originating from previously colonized, distinct cultures are multiplying, translation can only be dealt with from the perspective of cultural exchange, with an emphasis on the fact that any English text may conceal a whole palimpsest of distinct albeit interrelated cultural voices.

It is a fact that English texts are increasingly being produced by non-British or non-American cultures (even within Britain or the United States) which have at one time been colonized or at least had strong links with the colonial experience. Translation studies cannot ignore the great number of debates aimed at explaining what so-called *colonial discourse* is and how it works, what its strategies of dominance are and how these are reflected in texts. It is true that those debates originally appeared in literary and cultural theory, but now they encompass separate (albeit interconnected) fields such as anthropology, philosophy, sociology and literature and art.

What do we understand, then, by *colonial discourse*? I would say that it is, in the first place, the entirety of forms of knowledge which were developed in the West with the object of studying, analysing and, finally, exercising power over other cultures, and, secondly, the intimate relationship that these forms have with language and the production of texts: the textual building up of a suitable context that supports and fosters the image of the other and justifies its domination (See Young 159).

Fundamentally —although I know that radical postmodern theorists would reject the notion of *fundamentals*— the questions that cultural analysts pose when discussing the problem of identity and representation are much the same questions that translators or translatologists should ask themselves, when confronted with clear evidence that all concepts and representations of the Other which are used in literary texts, travel books, even academic essays on literature, anthropology, literature, art and so on (describing the other culture, the foreigner, the member of a minority, the marginal author), are conditioned by the ideological machinery of imperialism.

I would say that, all in all, the translator is a privileged reader, an interpreter of other cultures and discourses with whom they are more or less familiar. Translators do not differ ostensibly from anthropologists when they examine the foreign culture and present it, *re*-present it so that others might have access to it in an immediate way. In this way, the translator is also a mediator but, we may ask, to what extent is s/he mediation a legitimate one?

To what extent is the translator's interpretation of the original author's intentions in its original context conditioned by the very same ideological —and imperialist— mechanisms which permeate *throughout* his/her culture and forms of knowledge?

To what extent does the translator's mediation achieve an equilibrium between what the target culture expects and the —possibly vindictive— intentions of the original authors from the source culture?

The translator may in the end acknowledge that their text is just another step in the process by which a culture provides itself with images of the Others, *because a*

culture needs these images, for a culture is always constructed in opposition to other cultures.

Consequently, I would like to allude to an area of contention which I consider to be of particular interest in a journal dealing with margins and minorities in contemporary English literature. It is as relevant to the student of literature interested in postmodernism and the hermeneutic problems raised by it, as it is to the translator faced with highly problematic texts. The area I refer to is that of *postcolonialism*, be it the difficult field of postcolonial theory, the incredibly rich but equally complicated universe of postcolonial literature, or the recent and suggestive field of postcolonial translation, which promises to become a major theoretical and practical challenge in translation studies in the years to come.

It is quite important to recognise that both postmodernism and postcolonialism inaugurate a new era of possibilities. They are, therefore, *post-*; they claim to be the beginning of a new way of looking at things.

The tension between postcolonialism and postmodernism is quite similar to that which takes place between feminism and postmodernism. Women's studies and feminist discourse pose a *counterdiscourse*, an attempt at contesting, destabilizing, even annulling the effects of hegemonic, totalizing and universalizing discourse which are heralded in the West by the logo-phallo— centricity of white men.

Nowadays, all theoretical works which are considered essential reading in postmodernism —work by Foucault, Derrida, Lacan, Deleuze, Guattari, Baudrillard, Vattimo and many others— also seek to destabilize traditional forms of knowledge, as regards philosophy, history, anthropology, literature, etc. In short, postmodern authors aim to undermine the foundations of Western knowledge, the so-called *grand récits*.

It would logically follow that the long feminist struggle should incorporate postmodern propositions in the face of their common enemy: patriarchal hegemonic and totalizing discourse.

However, feminists have also discovered the same problems of totalization in postmodern authors, in a large sense because postmodernism is not a way of starting from zero, but a de-centering of previous forms of knowledge, with recourse to devices such as paradox or catachresis, which may lead writers to adopt, momentarily, certain postulates that from a radical stance (such as radical feminist criticism) would incite reaction and open rejection. The long-term effect of these devices, though, should bring about a true reversal of the establishment's expectations since in the long run they play against the intentions of the patriarchal subject and his desire for closure and confidence.

But it is also well known that there is an open debate today between a "postmodern" feminism, as it were, that adopts the conclusions of postmodern theory, and a "radical" feminism that rejects the adoption of postmodern postulates such as "the death of the author" and instead looks for a clear-cut and powerful Authoress who writes like a woman and challenges both the masculine authorial discourse and the postmodern "weak" discourse of the androgyne whose gender is being dissolved as much as his/her genre.

Similarly, there exists a duality in postcolonialism; we have a "postmodern" (if I am permitted this adjective) as well as a "radical" postcolonialism. As far as the English language is concerned, the latter refers mostly to Commonwealth writers and critics, inheritors of nationalist resistance movements (a good few of them with strong

links to Marxism).[1] This group would probably reject the term *postcolonialist writers* although they do oppose colonialism and want to bring their oppressed identities *beyond* colonialism, and obviously resist Western hegemonic practices. Here we have a core of literary texts from former British colonies and the criticism they have given rise to, both opposing an alternative, *marginal* canon to traditional syllabuses. As to the former, "postmodern postcolonialism", it is a second-generation postcolonialism that takes place in Western metropolitan and academic centres and *does* incorporate certain postmodern postulates.[2] This is *postcolonialism* proper, specifically oriented to cultural criticism. It is generally accepted that the foundations of such postcolonialism were laid by Edward W. Said in his seminal work *Orientalism* and in subsequent studies, and its main exponents are Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak. In fact, there is a whole school of lesser theorists who follow in their wake, analysing the literary, cultural (and, to some extent, translative) issues that deal with the multiplicity of voices —languages, cultures and power relationships— hidden behind the seemingly simple act of writing in English in a post-colonial world.

To sum up, feminism and postcolonialism present two *subaltern discourses* that aspire to strike back creating a *counterdiscourse*, the *talking back* alluded to by the North American black writer bell hooks. These are theoretical positions in which the most important element is the *representation* of the subaltern: be they a woman, a colonial subject, or both woman *and* colonial subject at the same time.

Clearly, all of the above has a tremendous bearing on translation. In short, an appreciation of the Other *equates to a translation of the Other*, that is to say, a translation of the reality, the experience and the expectations of the Other, in terms comprehended by, let's say, the Same. How can we achieve a legitimate, ethical translation of the Other? How can we become postcolonial translators?[3]

It is worth noting that, just as radical feminists negate the possibility that a feminine text may be translated by a man —and, further, the claim that it is perfectly legitimate to tamper with the original text with impunity and modify it at will—, it would be equally impossible, on the same grounds, for a postcolonial author (for example, an Anglo-Indian writer) to be translated by somebody other than a postcolonial, anglo-Indian translator, bilingual and bicultural. Language is just one aspect, though perhaps the most important one, of the universe that comes into play in translation.[4]

Of course, the solution depends not only on the adoption of postmodern postulates, but also on handling them so that, to echo Spivak, in combination with Marxist, feminist, and psychoanalytical proposals, together with the discourses of native traditions, they come to a mutual halt. It is not possible to set up stable signifiers; it is also futile to try to attain stable subject positions. In the same way, a "faithful", "ethical" translation (or "perfect equivalence") turns out to be nothing more than a pipe dream.

As previously mentioned, the first adoption of "postmodern" conclusions to the colonial question was made by Edward Said in *Orientalism*, which heralded genuine postcolonial thinking. His conclusions (drawn mostly from the French philosopher Michel Foucault) lead us directly to an *impasse*: history, anthropology, philology etc. were all conditioned by ideological mechanisms.[5] Even more so: the Other that was the object of their study was nothing but a phantasm, a chimera. The East is an imaginary space constructed by the West: "a kind of Western projection onto and will to govern over the Orient (95)." Applied to translation, this would imply that translating an anglo-Indian and Islamic author such as Salman Rushdie would set into motion

images and stereotypes of India, Indians, Indians in Britain, Muslims and the Islamic culture, in such a way that the authentic voice of the author would be dissolved and suppressed in the representations that the translator and his/her readers have constructed or re-created. So, there is no way out. It is no longer possible to be faithful, it is not possible to translate without betraying. In fact, *betrayal (*tradire*) is at the core of translation (*traduire*), and without it translation cannot exist*, because translated texts are cogs in the machinery of imperialist eurocentrism, the builder of virtual identities.

Even the existence of postcolonial theory itself, the existence of an interest in the Other, becomes part of the same strategy. This is something postcolonial theorists know, of course, and use to their advantage: the Other is there for Western knowledge to study, dissect and —why not?— vindicate and extol in a Museum of the Periphery. From a traditional point of view, the Other is done for once it is confined to a casket; a politically correct glass case where students of literature, translation or the ethnic arts can see what the Other looks like and even make gestures at him or her: pretend that there is in fact communication, cultural exchange or even hybridisation. It remains forever domesticated, and the constant demand for new, fashionable Others should be warning enough of the trivialization of the whole issue. From a postmodern and postcolonial point of view, though, it is in the extended belief in a glass case and the Western eagerness for vicarious anti-selves that the force of the Other resides. No longer an "Other" in capital letters, restricted, closed and simplistic, the postcolonial concept of identity is quite a bit more complex and dynamic, forever caught in the process of creating new identities. There is indeed hybridisation; a distressing aftertaste that makes the Western observer, reader or analyst suspect that something has gone wrong.

The adoption of new (postmodern) concepts which question totalization and confinement, as first suggested by Said, will allow the *voice of the Other* to gain the importance that it deserves; one that otherwise would seem to be hopelessly annulled. Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak, who together with Said form the so-called "Holy Trinity of postcolonialism", tackle this issue, Bhabha focusing on the failure of imperialist machinery when trying to create stable identities, and Spivak examining the possibility of *rewriting* or back-translating, subaltern or native texts.[6] Bhabha underlines the *ambivalence* that permeates Western categorisations of the Other. This is a term that he has borrowed from psychoanalysis, and he refers to the existence of contradictory feelings of attraction and repulsion as regards the desired object. Any attempt at locating, describing, studying or translating the Other usually fails; the attempt at making the other's reality concrete usually ends up in a contradiction that reveals the relativity or contingency of what is supposed to be stable, integral, closed knowledge. In trying to translate the foreign in familiar terms (or in familiar categories of otherness), the hegemonizing machinery is exposed. The deep chasm of the untranslatable opens up; an infinite fugue of significances. And the result is something (a text, an identity) that is *between* two worlds, not exactly foreign or our own, but at the same time both: a text which carries with it the stigma of displacement and the untranslatable.

In fact, to a certain extent, the text is a *hybrid*. Hybridisation allows the subjugated subject to speak aloud.

In fact, the translation of the Other, though essential as part of the Same's attempts to define him/herself in terms of Others, carries with it a germ of anxiety and

instability that the Other may use to his/her advantage. As a result, the West discovers in the innumerable crevices of untranslatability, its own hybrid character and the artificiality in the construction of both its own canon and that of the Orient, the non-West, its Others.

Let us take, for instance, Derek Walcott's recreation of God's voice in *Omeros*: And God said to Achille, "Look, I giving you permission/ to come home. Is I send the sea-swift as a pilot,/ the swift whose wings is the sign of my crucifixion./ And thou shalt have no God should in case you forgot my commandments." The use of Creole-English here suggests a reversal in the expectations created in the reader, given the fact that the narrator's voice is expressed in standard English. In my opinion, the translation should somehow convey this shift in voices, despite the translatorial dogma which states that geographical varieties cannot be conveyed. In fact, even in functional terms, the use of another variety here has the specific purpose of challenging the general reader's expectations about the usage of varieties. One should expect therefore that God's voice be expressed in a high, Authorized Version register, as shown in the last line. A Creole-speaking God is readily imagined to be black. This *re-version* should by no means be lost in translation. It is part of the wider postcolonial concern on the complex relationship between spoken and written language, and the ambivalence and contradiction which often comes as a result of such a relationship. It also mirrors the negotiation that takes place between language and its materialization in historical, political or social relations, usually expressed by division and polarity (Miller 275). This negotiation may occur at any linguistic level: be it the phonological characteristics of local pronunciation, the morpho-syntactic, lexical and sociolinguistic level in the form of local varieties, or the level of textual conventions. Walcott's *The Spoiler's Return* follows the dactylic rhythm of the calypso or *caiso*, an eminently oral composition as opposed to the classic pentameter. In Salman Rushdie's *Shame*, none of the characters are supposed to be speaking in English; in *Midnight's Children* there are noticeable influences of Urdu syntax (Martínez 80-1, 181-3), and a duality between the nativist strength of oral language in the dialogues, and the weak, male and imperialist weakness of the written language is also to be found (Srivastava 74). The standardisation of the language that we often find in translation masks the multiplicity of real life.

According to Feroza Jussawalla, Salman Rushdie "can be surmized as speaking for *syncretic translatability* in *Shame* when he seems to identify himself with both Omar Khayyam Shakil the narrator and Edward Fitzgerald" (the 19th-century *sui generis* translator into English of the 12th-century Persian poet Omar Khayyam, after whom the character in Rushdie's novel is named):

> Omar Khayyam's position as a poet is curious. He was never very popular in his native Persia; and he exists in the West *in a translation* that is really a complete reworking of his verses... I, too, am a translated man. I have been *borne across*. It is generally believed that something is always lost in translation; I cling to the notion —and use in evidence, the success of Fitzgerald-Khayyam— that something can also be gained.[7]

Jussawalla takes the stance that we should not confuse the *hybridisation* of post-colonial theories such as Bhabha's (which, in her opinion, do *not* leave room for "indigeneities" to retain and carry their cultures in translation) with the *syncretism*

that is actually effected in Rushdie's work (such as *The Satanic Verses*), once it is properly contextualized in its Indo-Islamic origins and tradition. Nevertheless, in my opinion, Rushdie's position displays certain *postmodern* traits which have to do with the ambiguity of hybridisation: the difficult position of traditional cultures in the contemporary world; the risks (as Rushdie now knows only too well) that dealing with them entails, but also the benefits that this encounter of cultures produces; the appropriation, as it were, by other voices, of the English language and of Western assumptions associated with language. "Authenticity", says Rushdie in a well-known article which Jussawalla also quotes, "is the respectable child of old fashioned exoticism".[8]

In this sense, the (European!) translator of postcolonial works becomes somebody who discovers both their own hybrid character and the ambivalence of their discourse. Through them, the colonial Other should not be *subjected too much to* the dominance of the representations that come into play within the target context.[9]

Therefore, a *counterdiscourse* or "talking back" would seem to require the participation not only by those who take on the title of the Same, but also by those who assume the condition of Others. Destabilization has already sprung from *within* the West, in a translatological game played out between ever changing cultures, or between centres and peripheries: the game of desire. A translation of women's works undertaken by women and intended only for women amounts to the closing up of all alternatives, the rejection of all negotiation, the rejection of all kinds of *commerce* (be it carnal or otherwise) and consequently, the rejection of its fruits. An anglo-Indian translation undertaken by anglo-Indian-Spanish translators and intended for anglo-Indian-Spaniards implies the negation of the possibility of challenging hegemonic practices by means of the *rewriting* that creates new contexts, that modifies the system's structures and destabilizes them. Not to take advantage of the possibilities opened by postmodern theories seems to me to be almost tantamount to admitting that we've already been defeated.

(Translated by Mark Anderson)

Notes

1. This term was used already by V S Naipaul, and soon became, as Jussawalla rightly points out, "a catch-all literary, political and cultural term". Although more and more specifically circumscribed to post-British colonialism, in fact its theoretical bases owe a lot to early critics of colonialism who did not write in English, such as Martinica-born Frantz Fanon. They have variously been referred to as *postcolonial critics* (not *theorists*) or *Commonwealth critics*. See Brydon 1994: 284.
2. Aijaz Ahmad considers their origin to be in Marxist critical theory.
3. Once taken on board, the idea of postcolonial translation presents us with some particularly constructive reflections on cultural aspects relevant to the translator. Up until now, translation studies have not paid enough attention to the often complex relationship between language and culture. The concept of language as a *a vehicle for culture* tends to be associated with the single voice of a language employed to express a community's sense of belonging, and consequently tends to draw a parallel between the description of the discourse and the ethnographic description of the culture that frames the text in

question. Translation studies suffer from this one-dimensional vision, particularly if we consider how the development of these studies is usually reduced to two paradigms, practically impervious to ambiguity, except by mutual interference: the language and culture of origin (LO and *CO*) and the destination language and culture (LT and *CT*). These paradigms form an abstraction, as well as a simplification, that can make the translation of a large number of texts much easier but it would be clearly inappropriate to apply them to the translation of works by authors such as Salaman Rushdie, ostensibly English, but with the underlying influence of Urdu affecting the syntax. See T.N. Dhar, "Micro-Macro Symbiosis: the Form of Rushdie's *Midnight Children*", *Journal of Indian Writing in English* XIII, 1, 16-22; and Aruna Srivastava, "The Empire Writes Back': Language and History in *Shame* and *Midnight's Children*", in Ian Adam and Helen Tiffin (eds), *Past the Last Post: Theorising Post-Colonialism and Post-Modernism*, New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991, 65-78. These questions are developed further in my recent book *Traducir al otro* (Cuenca: Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha/ Escuela de Traductores de Toledo, 1997).

4. One may wonder then, if a translator should replicate the original author in other domains of his/her experience: for example, class, language competence, place of origin, age, and so on.
5. It is generally accepted that the *post-colonial* label has been adopted by the followers of Edward Said's most influential book, *Orientalism* (1978), which deals with relations between east and west in terms of power and knowledge. Nevertheless, in previous critical works, like *Beginnings* (1975), Said had already begun to explore the so-called "adjacent discourses and disciplines"; According to Ajay Heble, "Said's notion of adjacency is particularly resonant for post-colonial theory and practice because it signals the importance of moving beyond both the 'meaning in language' formulation of New Criticism and the poststructuralist valorization of textuality into an exploration of the complex levels of interaction between literary texts and social and cultural processes" (Heble 1994: 1305).
6. From the perspectives opened up by postcolonial theorists, views of translation are now radically different from those expounded in functionalist studies. In fact, upon adopting a great deal of Jacques Derrida's deconstructivist views, Gayatri Spivak, one of the most outstanding "postcolonial" thinkers, and the translator of Derrida's *De la grammatologie* into English , observed that the conception of language, culture, meaning, in short, translation, is very close to deconstruction (in particular he was influenced by Walter Benjamin's theories in the essay "The Task of the Translator". The emphasis on the transformation of the original into the translation, which then becomes the more durable, means that both deconstruction and postcolonial theories of translation focus more on the form than on the content; and consequently, according to Spivak, the postcolonial translator should, "surrender herself to the linguistic rhetoricity of the original text" (Spivak 189).
7. Salman Rushdie, *Shame* (New York: Knopf, 1983) 24.
8. Salman Rushdie, "Commonwealth Literature Does Not Exist," *Imaginary Homelands. Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (London: Granta, 1991) 61-70.
9. The single consideration of cultures not as "all" homogeneous, but as dynamic structures formed by layers and opposing currents that integrate and separate, set in motion by questions of power and representation, which obviously cannot be encapsulated by sharply defined frontiers, is a bold one in comparison to traditional notions of culture within translatology. Even the concept of a dynamic polysystem may prove too limited due to its structuralist aspects. What it would deal with, to draw a parallel with recent debates on North American literature (and we shouldn't forget that postcolonial translation is principally literary), is the need to put into question the canonical nature of the concept of both language and culture: to take up the "postmodernist" view of thinkers and anthropologists like James Clifford, who conceived culture in terms of a dialectic of different texts [*The Predicament of Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1988) 38]; and, in language, to adopt

the *polyphonic* perspective of Bakhtin (Bakhtin 1981), or the concept of the *semiosphere* of Lotman (Lotman 1991), much more fluid and malleable than the polysystem of the Tel Aviv school. The eminently *functionalist* focus of *Descriptive Translation Studies*, which obviously allows its models to incorporate pragmatic and ethnolinguistic considerations, nevertheless proves insufficient when dealing with postcolonial translation. Its emphasis on the rules of the destination language and the manipulation of the original text certainly allows us to identify the strategies that conform to the *etic* perspective (the anthropological concept that allocates the functions of the ethnic object once recontextualized into the culture that is studying it) —we are excluding here the *Translation Studies* group of Theo Hermans, Lawrence Venuti, André Lefevere, Susan Bassnett and others— but it neglects the possibility of reactivating the *emic* or original perspective in the destination culture. Above all, it side-steps fundamental questions concerning cultural change, hybridisation and the *agency* of the subjects represented within the translation.

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