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The Subversive Scribe and the Future of Translation

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ABSTRACT   *Apparently, the translator's job is subtler than the writer's because translation is a later stage. Besides, translators are similar to exiles, since every time they move away from their mother tongue to serve another language, they experience an exile in their own language. Then, translating a text is not possible, but reproducing the contexts of the original text: reading, and translating, could be considered a kind of rewriting, since readers complete the text. Every work relates to other texts and therefore, it is no more than just one of all the possible versions of a given text. Apparently, the next step is recovering the subtext of any work, the latent version of the original, which is possible only by means of persuasive translations that reveal unexpected subtexts. Consequently, it is vital to understand translation as a hermeneutical act and a space of approach that respects the difference between cultures.*

KEYWORDS : subtexts, rewriting, feminist translation

The Subversive Scribe and the Future of Translation

Just as translators may develop political sympathies for experimental feminist writing and then transfer those attitudes to their work, so translators who are already politicized may take offence at texts that are unpalatable or politically unacceptable. Like Peter Newmark, who recently argued that translators should 'correct' source material in the name of the "moral facts as known" […], a concept he simplifies with the term "truth" […], feminist translators 'correct' texts that they translate in the name of feminist 'truths'. (Von Flotow 1997: 24)

The Translation As an Enhanced Version of the Original Text

For Borges, it seems to be obvious that the translator's job is subtler and more civilized than the writer's because translation is a later stage, since the translator follows the writer (Levine [1991] 1998: 23). Besides, Levine believes that translators are similar to the exiles given that every time they move away from their mother tongue to serve another language, they experience an exile in their own language. In the same sense, thanks to their broadened cultural contexts, both exiles and translators have an insider view on the limits of their mother tongue (*ibid.*). In fact, Levine goes on to assert that translating a given text is not possible, but reproducing the contexts of the original text (*ibid.*: 26). Furthermore, she maintains that translation is a kind of writing that enables professionals to find their own language starting from another different one (*ibid.*: 24).

Then, apparently the next question is where the context ends and where the text begins, for the borders among languages are not impenetrable: there are secret ties among all languages. The bilingual writer, the translator and the exile know that every single language is not pure–not a single language is an isolated island, but it contains other languages (*ibid.*: 26). Borges addresses this question in his essay "Las versiones homéricas" (1932) and wonders which of all the available versions of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* is *the original*. His conclusion is categorical: only a Greek from the 10th century BC could have the answer (Levine [1991] 1998: 27). In this sense, it seems that Borges anticipates the critique of the concept of *authorship* that was developed by Foucault some years later.

Thus, it seems that the only difference between the original and the translation is that the latter has a *visible* reference to which it can be compared. On the contrary, it is likely that the original has forgotten its tacit referent because otherwise it refers to a disconcerting banality (Levine [1991] 1998: 27). Moreover, and in line with Barthes ([1968] 1987), Borges considers reading a kind of writing, since readers, as rewriters, enrich and complete the text, which guarantees the continued existence of the original: every single work establishes a dialogue with other texts and a context. Consequently, texts are *relationships* that necessarily develop in other contexts (Levine [1991] 1998: 23).

In fact, the original is no more than just one of all the possible versions of a given text for Borges. Apparently, Joyce, who collaborated in the translation into Italian of the section "Anna Livia Plurabelle",

shares this point of view because he described *Finnegans Wake* (1939) as a work "in process" that had reached its destination by means of translation. During the translation, Joyce developed several aspects of the original work that became more explicit in the Italian version. Furthermore, he considered Italian more musical and mundane, so he created a more colloquial version full of double meanings (Levine [1991] 1998: 29).

The Translation As Subversion: the Feminist Translation Infante's Inferno

Moreover, according to Steiner, Benjamin agrees with Joyce and claims that the incarnation of the original represents an annunciation of the forms of the future (1984: 74). Levine links the concept of *subversion* to the idea of recovering the substratum of any work, or in other words, its primitive origin. Therefore, she supports the subversive nature of translation because, on the one hand, it constitutes a betrayal in the sense of *traduttore, traditore*, and on the other hand, because it reveals the subterranean version of the work: during the process of translation, the latent version of the original becomes explicit. To a certain extent, the latent version of the original is a subtext: persuasive translations discover unexpected subtexts and hidden meanings. After all, the first and last role of translation is connecting meanings (Levine [1991] 1998: 30).

Then, the translator cannot be identified with the idea of an obsequious and anonymous scribe, but with a subversive one. This is so because the translator's task destroys the form of the original while reproducing the meaning in a new form. Throughout this process, translation constitutes the extension of the original because it tries to alter reality by means of re-creating. The theory of translation lies between what Jakobson calls the dogma of untranslatability–the idea that the art is formal and essentially untranslatable–and the trans-creational practices of those who apparently claim that everything is eligible to be translated, as Pound and Joyce. Obviously, both approaches are equally valid (Levine [1991] 1998: 30 y 32).

Hence, bearing in mind the concept of *ideology* (Hermans, Bassnett and Lefevere), the linguistic feminism and the subversive scribe, it seems that the Translation Studies take for granted that translating is an hermeneutical act and assume the death of the subject, the dissolution of the binary oppositions and hierarchies, the new concept of *canon*, the re-emergence of the secondary, etc. This was the ideal scene for the feminist movement to apply its translation theories. However, it posed some problems: in some cases, these circumstances were used as an excuse to go too far (Vidal 1998: 101). In fact, Vidal claims that these new perspectives about translation and gender have appeared in response to two categories considered secondary and have revealed against the hegemonic discourse to demand their presence in the public space, which has been possible thanks to the "cultural difference" (Bhabha 1990) and the cultural diversity (Vidal 1998: 105).

At the same time, it is also necessary to "re-sexualize" language and use translation as a tool to discover cultures and fight against oppression, as Vidal claims (1998: 109). We could take as an example Suzanne Jill Levine's translation ([1991] 1998) of *La habana para un infante difunto* ([1979] 1986), written by Guillermo Cabrera Infante. In the English version, the translator understands the process as an inevitably subversive act and therefore, she justifies her decisions and explains that they were approved by the author (Vidal 1998: 111). Among other decisions, it is remarkable that she replaces the original title by *Infante's Inferno*, since she thinks that it represents a parodical alliteration full of allusions. Levine understands Cabrera Infante's novel as a Dantesque travel in which the author travels to La Habana during his youth in search of many Beatrices and love.

Despite the fact that Levine admits that *Infante's Inferno* is a book "whose content is oppressively male" (Levine 1983: 88), apparently she tries to show that somehow her translation is faithful, precisely because the authors she chooses to translate are subversive and plural, that is to say, they practice the écriture feminine à la Cixous (Vidal 1998: 111). Nevertheless, Levine wonders: "Where does this leave a woman as translator of such book? Is she not a double betrayer, to play Echo to this Narcissus, repeating the archetype once again?" (Levine 1983: 83). On the face of it, she determines to implement some changes, even though examples are lacking (Von Flotow 1997: 26). Apart from the title mentioned before, we could take as an example the sentence "ningún hombre puede violar a una mujer" (no man can rape a woman). Levine translates this sentence as "no wee man can rape a woman" (1983: 83) because she considers that the original text implies that women are consenting victims and she refuses to perpetuate this idea (Von Flotow 1997: 27).

Conclusions

As we have seen in this paper, translating means not only replacing one word with another, but also reaching and revealing the underlying subtext. To do this, it is necessary a subversive translator who dares to make changes, as in the case of some feminist translators.

In this sense, Vidal suggests carrying out an archeology and genealogy of translation, which would imply addressing some questions, as for instance: Why was this text chosen? Who chose it? When? For whom? ... (1998: 146). Moreover, during this analyze we should bear in mind that power cannot be acquired or shared, and neither get lost: power is something that is present (*ibid*.). In the same way, she claims that we would be able to face the tentacles of the microphysics of power if we reached a transversal ethic of translation: that is to say, understanding translation as a space of approach and contact between cultures that respects the differences existing between both cultures (*ibid*.: 147).

Thus, translators should be considered social agents that carry out their work according to socially determined aims and interests (*ibid*.: 150). Hence, we need the translators and their eyes and glasses to look at ourselves and the others, because the trajectory that links them to what they see starts from what they have been seeing (*ibid*.:154).

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