

Reflections on Translation and its Hierarchies

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Abstract

Sen considers the hierarchies of readers, writers, texts and cultures with the aim to suggest that the hierarchies are not stable structures - that is, entities that seemingly occupy a position of privilege in the hierarchical arrangement can actually be shown as differently stationed. He raises several questions related to translation and indicates the presence of issues that surround the binaries. Taking cue from Walter Benjamin's essay *The Task of the Translator*, argues that it is the translated text that can, cutting through linguistically constructed notions of differences, provide us with an awareness of a fundamental cross-cultural, trans-national sameness.

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Of all the various modes of literary expression, it is translation that arguably attracts the maximum amount of controversy. The disciplinary field of translation studies is forever a location of riotous discord over issues such as the relative status of the translator and the author, the translated text and the original text and so on. I wish to suggest that one reason why translation generates so much of debate is that, irrespective of the motives that occasion it, translation is never merely a literary exercise but one that necessarily engenders sets of hierarchies - tension ridden and inherently unstable - of readers, writers, texts and cultures. By hierarchies I wish to suggest sets of binaries that contain within it differentially privileged and positioned items - say, for example, the binaries of the translated text and the original text or the original author and the translator. In my paper I wish to discuss these hierarchies, with the chief aim of indicating their fundamentally provisional and unstable nature. Though it will not be my mission in this paper to establish the primacy of one item of a binary set over the other, I will, ultimately, try to defend the much maligned art of the translator and the often derided translated text itself.

The first set of hierarchy that I wish to look at is that of readers that a translated text generates. Quite obviously a translated text will have two categories of readers who will occupy differently privileged stations in the hierarchy of readers - there will be readers who access both the source and the translated texts and there will be readers who access only the translated text. Readers who access both source and translated texts do not primarily make up the intended readership of the translated text. But paradoxically it is to this group of readers that the translated text will reveal itself as itself. When a reader who has read the source text reads the translated text, it is likely

that she will recreate in her mind the very process of translation - curled up with the translated text in the cozy comfort of her bed, her face will light up with the glow of an involuntary smile as she appreciates the translator's fluent handling of a rather tricky cultural specificity or she will wince at a ham-handed attempt at translating literally. She will not read the text for the story, not to satisfy the 'what happens next' urge - she already knows what happens next - she will read to engage critically with the creative process of the activity of translation itself. But the reader who will read only the translated text will treat it at par with any other original text. Thus the translated text will elicit a more nuanced, a significantly more critical reading from the reader who accesses both source and translated texts than from the reader who reads only the translated text.

I have mentioned, however, that this hierarchy is unstable - the position of privilege that one group of readers enjoys vis-à-vis the translated text is by no means absolute. A particular charm of the translated text is its ability to suggest to readers belonging to different cultural paradigms the strange, fascinating qualities of the source culture. The reader who reads only the translated text is able to experience, through the act of reading and by exercising her faculty of imagination, the exhilaration of an entry into a novel socio-cultural space - an experience that is closed to the reader of both source and translated texts, as such a reader in her reading of the translated text is not transported anywhere beyond the margins of her lived cultural knowledge. I can say with a degree of certainty that readers like you and me who have experienced an indescribable feeling of having been taken away to strange and haunting cultural realms while reading Gabriel Garcia Marquez in translation have not experienced the same kind of cultural transportation while reading say Bhanu Bhakta or Tagore in translation. It is evident then that one mode of reading reveals, more than anything else, the textuality of the translated work; in the other mode of reading the translation presents itself primarily as a cultural text.

The author - translator hierarchy is an entrenched reality in the world of translation. The author writes and the translator translates; the burden of true creativity lies upon the author while the translator's art is considered somewhat derivative. Despite the fact that there are innumerable translators in almost every human language who have produced literary gems of immeasurable value, the author - translator relationship continues to be read in terms of the pioneer - follower archetype. There is, of course, a very pragmatic reason for this - if the author had not written, the translator would have had no text to translate.

But a closer look at this hierarchical arrangement reveals its rather tenuous nature. I will cite the celebrated example of Milan Kundera here to bear out my case. For a very considerable period of time a substantial part of his body of works, written in the original Czech language, including masterpieces such as *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* and *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* were banned in his native

country. Effectively this meant that Kundera's works existed only in translations and in an interview Kundera admitted, in his inimitable tongue-in-cheek style, that for this period it was the not so small group of international translators of his works who fed and clothed him. In Kundera's case the extremely rare occurrence of the translation supplanting the original also happened - a Spanish version of his novel *Life is Elsewhere* that was published from Argentina was actually a translation of the English translation of the original Czech language text.

There is, in the publishing industry, an awareness of the very real possibility of the translator overtaking, in a material and numerical sense, the original author. Let us take as example the case of the famous Turkish writer Orhan Pamuk. We can safely speculate that even if the entire literate population of Turkey read his books, the total number of such readers will always be only a fraction of readers who read him in say, English or Spanish translations. Aware of this real possibility of numerical ascendancy of the translator over the original author, publishers insert special protective clauses in translation contracts to ensure that the original author's earnings always surpass that of the translator's. Even in terms of typographic and general design of books, publishers contractually ensure that the translator is never given prominence over the original author for example, the 2006 Faber and Faber edition of the English translation of Pamuk's *Istanbul* does not have the translator's name on the front or back covers of the book. The name of the translator, Maureen Freely, appears only on the title page of the book, printed in a font size that is significantly smaller than the one used to print Pamuk's name. It is a regular international publishing practice to actually take definite measures to inhibit the pre-eminence of the translator vis-à-vis the original author.

The balloon of the translator's ascendancy is punctured, however, if we think about the translator figure in terms of notions proposed by Roland Barthes in his seminal essay *The Death of the Author*. Barthes notes that an insistence on the presence of the Author gives rise to the issue of 'temporality' in the sense that the Author is considered the past of the text. Barthes proposes the replacement of the Author figure by that of the 'scriptor' and suggests that the scriptor and the text are born concurrently, with the scriptor having no existence beyond and exceeding the text. If we continue to think in this Barthesian vein we will see how the translator figure, perhaps even more than that of the figure of the Author, is textually determined and limited. The original text can be considered the true past of the translator-scriptor who in any case has no life beyond the translated text. The translator's figure is reduced to a somewhat shadowy apparition that is engendered by one text and circumscribed by another. Thus in the Barthesian scheme of things the creative agency of the translator is seriously limited - metaphorically we can think of the translator not as a progenitor but as a midwife, a transporter who carries a text contained in one language to another. Here I am tempted to speculate that this is perhaps the reason why we still do not have computer programmes, which if fed appropriate input, can produce an original text of satisfactory quality, even though we now do have programmes that can produce

translations of acceptable merit. In other words, the Barthesian model provides us with a clue to understanding the phenomenon of more and more translation jobs being taken over by machines while the activity of producing original texts still remains a human enterprise.

I will come to the hierarchy of the original text and the translated text through an essay titled *Gained in Translation* that I came across while surfing the Internet. Written by Erica Johnson Debeljak, who is a translator herself, the essay that blends personal narrative with critical musings, perfectly captures the hierarchical nature of the relationship between the original text and the translated text. Because it is quite finely written I will take the liberty of quoting at length from the essay:

In the early morning hours of an April day in 1992, I had a rendezvous with my long-distance lover, Ales, at the Piazza Navona in Rome. I had traveled on a transatlantic flight from New York's JFK Airport, and he had traveled by train from Slovenia, Italy's newly-minted neighbor to the northeast. Sitting on a bench beneath Bernini's Fontana dei Fiumi waiting for him to appear, I opened the book that I had started on the plane the night before: *Immortality* by Milan Kundera. (...) I had finished one chapter - the one that ends with Paul racing to Agnes' hospital bed desperate for one last kiss - and was turning the page to embark upon another, when I sensed someone beside me on the cool stone bench and felt the touch of a hand at the small of my back. I looked round to see the face of my lover, long-distance no more, looking into my own.¹

In that instant, Kundera's Paul and Agnes vanished into the bright sunlit square. Ales, unknowingly taking up Paul's fictional impulse, leaned in to kiss me. The urban cacophony of workaday Rome seemed to rise an octave or two, the scent of a thousand espressos wafted through the morning air, the rivers of Bernini's fountain - the Danube, Nile, Ganges and Rio della Planta from the four corners of the earth - spewed ecstatic jets of cool water above our heads. But just as his lips reached mine, he stopped and let out a cry of surprise. "Wait", he said and gestured toward the book that he had spotted on my lap.

He bent over to reach into the duffel bag that he had placed on the ground next to him. After rummaging in it for a few seconds, he pulled out his own book. "Look", he said triumphantly.

His was a paperback whereas mine was a hardcover and had a different cover design, but the coincidence was unmistakable. The book Ales held up toward me was entitled *Nesmrtnost* and was written by none other than Milan Kundera. Laying his volume down on top of mine, Ales took my face between his two hands and gazed at me with his melancholy central European eyes.

1 Erica Johnson Debeljak, *Gained in Translation*, article published in Eurozine (22.07.2005); <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/>; accessed on 18.07.2010.

"We're reading the same book", he whispered. His face was so close to mine that I could feel the heat of his words on my skin, and of all the many things I might have said at that moment, of all the phrases which I might have murmured or sighed or moaned, this was my response: "Only you're reading in translation."

Ales pulled sharply away from me. "We're both reading in translation", he corrected reconsidering whether he wanted to kiss me after all. A distinct coldness had entered his voice, and it seemed possible, that after the long months of waiting the affair was going to end then and there:

"I know that, I knew that", I thought mournfully to myself: "Of course, we're both reading in translation. Kundera's a Czech. That was why I was reading him in the first place... to get closer to you and your world. But it was too late. The awful, ignorant, arrogant words were out, and I couldn't take them back. I closed my eyes. Euphoria followed by this plunge into despair, the sleepless night of travel beginning to catch up with me, the wounding brightness of the morning: it all seemed too much to bear".²

I am sure all of us present here have noted how, through a variety of tropes - the transatlantic flight, the international rail travel, Bernini's geo-culturally plural fountain, the conflation of ancient and contemporary Rome - the stage is gradually and carefully set to introduce what is going to be the writer's chief thematic concern in the essay, namely, the possibilities of cross-cultural transaction that translation allows. I wish to come back to the issue of translation and the dynamics of cultural exchange later; at this point of time let us stay with the crucial utterance the writer makes: "Only you're reading in translation." In a classic instance of the Freudian slip, Erica Johnson articulates the often believed and frequently expressed idea about the translated text - that is it is a lesser text, that it will somehow never defeat its curse of being essentially parodic, caricaturish in nature. This mindset can be traced back to the liberal humanist critical paradigm, which held that while an original text appropriates objective realities through language, a translated text merely appropriates in a different language reality already contained in another language. In a platonic sense thus the translated text remains twice removed from reality.

But this hierarchical privileging of the original text in relation to the translated text has been seriously questioned in recent times and one of the earliest 20th century defences of the translated text is the now classic essay *The Task of the Translator* by Walter Benjamin published in 1923. A central argument which Benjamin forwards in this essay is that the translator "instead of imitating the sense of the original, must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original's way of meaning, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language...". For Benjamin the translated text is that unique space that allows the source language and

the target language to intermesh to finally give rise to what he calls 'pure language', which otherwise "remains hidden in the languages". Simply put, Benjamin's notion of pure language, if read mystically, harks back to the one language spoken by all men in the pre-Babel era and if read philologically, refers to the lost common language of all men.

Here I wish to visit, as promised earlier, the issue of translation and the dynamics of cultural exchange in the light of Benjamin's arguments. Translation across cultures inevitably raises disturbing and complicated issues of dominance, appropriation and influence, especially when it happens between two cultures of varying military and economic power, as for example, in the case of translations between colonizing and colonized cultures. It is a well-documented fact, and one that has been critically commented upon, amongst others, by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Harish Trivedi and Susan Bassnett that translation was an instrument of colonial control in British India. A simplified view of the imperial project of translation may be schematized thus - very many more English books were systematically translated in Indian languages than the other way round, so that Englishness could be extolled, taught and instilled and the few Indian language texts that were translated were deployed to bolster the Orientalist impulse to differentiate and to dominate. Translation clearly was not meant to build bridges, but to raise walls.

However, the mission to use translation as a dividing tool met with no spectacular success - contemporary research has unearthed instances of many English and Indians, both famous and unexceptional, who did through translations what was not expected of them, that is, move towards a better understanding and mutual acceptance of each other's cultures. An extremely intriguing, if somewhat startling, instance of this phenomenon is Queen Victoria herself, the Empress of India at a time when England's colonial might was at its peak. Shrabani Basu, in her recent book, *Victoria and Abdul: The True Story of the Queen's Closest Confidant* painstakingly documents the Queen's almost obsessive fascination with India that her Indian munshi Abdul Karim whetted. The Queen was over seventy when, in order to know India better, she started to take Urdu lessons from Abdul Karim: "As always, Karim wrote the lines first in Urdu, followed by Urdu in Roman script so the Queen could read out the lines, then finally the English translation".

It is a proof both of the triumph of translation and the Queen's remarkable fortitude that one of the Queen's last journal entries before her death on 22nd January, 1901 - a very private piece in which she grieves over the death of a son - is actually in Urdu and not in English.

Walter Benjamin perhaps provides a clue to understanding this phenomenon when he writes, "...languages are not strangers to one another, but are, a priori and apart from all historical relationships, interrelated in what they want to express".

It is the translated text that suggests this immense mysterious interrelatedness of languages; as Benjamin writes, "Translation thus ultimately serves the purpose of expressing the innermost relationship of languages to one another".³

It is therefore the translated text that draws our attention to the contingent and constructed nature of our linguistically manufactured notions of the Self and the other, the linguistic rationale of having international borders and the slicing up of cultures along linguistic fault lines. It is indeed a happy paradox that even though an act of translation has to necessarily deal with differences (of languages, of cultures) the ultimate effect of the translated text, in a way that is impossible for an original (not translated) text to achieve, is to bring home to us a sense of sameness.

3 Walter Benjamin - *The Task of the Translator* (Translated into English by Harry Zohn), Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, (eds.), *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, Vol. 1, 1913-1926, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004