Creative Translation, Transcreation or Simply Translation: How Can Literature Be Translated?

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Edward Young, in *Confectures on Original Composition in a Letter to the Author of 'Sir Charles Grandison,'* (1759) writes that:

> He that imitates the divine *Iliad* does not imitate Homer; but he who takes the same method, which Homer took, for arriving at a capacity for accomplishing a work so great tread in his steps to the sole fountain of immortality; drink where he drank, at the true Helicon, that is, at the breast of Nature. Imitate, but imitate not the *composition*, but the *man*.[1]

The idea of originality as Young defines it was fully applied to the theories of translation in 18th century Britain bringing about some inevitable consequences. Together with the emphasis on the reformation of language, it amplified and enriched the limits of the English language. The theories developed in Britain (centred on the figure of the artist and originality), conflicted head-on with the ideas that were circulating in France during the same period. With the establishment of the *Académies* and the rule of grammarians as guardians of the *bon usage*, the libertarian times of Rabelais—times of great invention—were over, and the predominant conception was that works written in other languages, when translated, should adapt to the rules and limits of the French language and the taste of the public. This meant that "excesses" and "improprieties" were cut and "adapted" to the predominant French tastes and culture.

These two views and parameters still rule the field. *Grosso Modo*, the two opposite fields can be summarised as follows: respect for the author (the English position), also called the art of translation; or respect for the language into which the author is translated (the French position), also called the craft of translation.

These two positions are, apparently, irreconcilable: in one, the translator forces the limits of his own language to incorporate the "dissonant, foreign" elements, such as neologisms, repetitions, syntactical challenges, as well as aspects that reflect differences in culture. The other view wants to smooth out as many differences as possible, both linguistic

and cultural, adapting the original to the target language so that the foreign authors in translation may sound local and be better understood because *their own contexts* have also been translated.

Considering these aspects, a provocative question: which translation is more radical? If we take into consideration that possible contexts and even interpretations generated by such contexts can be incorporated into a translation, then we will have to admit to the paradox that a fully 'adaptive' translation is more radical, more 'mimetic' than the 'original' one. However, in its effects, the 'adaptive' translation is less radical and groundbreaking. As a consequence, it doesn't 'translate' completely the work it purports to translate because it leaves out particulars that are essential for the original work to be considered 'original.' It is clear that this labyrinthine situation involves different concepts of mimesis as applied to the theory of translation: which translation translates *more*? Which translation endeavours to apprehend the work *in its entirety*? To what extent is this possible?

To add more complexity to this point, let's suppose that we have to translate a simple word—*house*—into another language. From the French into English—from *maison* into *house* or vice-versa—the concept, the feel, the associations that these readers, both the French and the English, experience, is altogether different. A *maison* for the French does not necessarily mean a single habitation, a detached house made of wood as Americans tend to imagine. On the other hand, the British also have a different concept of 'house' than the French and the American; 'street,' 'city centre/downtown,' and so many everyday notions we take for granted are as diverse as the cultures to which they belong and arouse different associations. Moreover, there are also psychological associations, varying from individual to individual, and they also play a role in what one feels, perceives, and understands. There is something to be said, however, in favour of the interplay between individual associations and translations. A good translation very often speaks to these individual associations and even to a greater extent, to individual imagination, so that this individual, even inhabiting primordially his or her own culture, can easily imagine a world beyond his or her own cultural borders. To my mind, this is one of the most, if not *the* most important function of translations. Considering all these complexities then, how literal can a literal translation be?

Either way, the *Pierre Menard* syndrome affects both positions.[2] Can a translation reflect the original or is it always, as Cervantes once commented, the inside out of a tapestry: all the stitches are there but subdued, discoloured, faint? The paradox of *Pierre Menard* is that in trying to reproduce the original text of the Quixote *ipsis litteris*, he is mired in the insurmountable problem of the intromission of time and history in his text and the permanent changes in context that these intromissions bring to his work. The fatality of time and history makes it impossible for any work to be repeatable and, as such, prompts it into a permanent state of re-reading and re-interpretation.

If this is true of any work of literature, then what else can be said about a literary translation? My emphasis here is the impossible fragility of our attempts in translation to capture the elusive original. In order to present my views about this problem, a quick digression on the theories of translation in Brazil will clarify the context from which I have emerged.

The concept of mimesis is central to this discussion. Aristotle proposes an empirical concept of mimesis which, applied to the theories of translation, implies that the models and forms for artistic imitation are selected or abstracted from the objects of sense-perception. Poetry has a philosophical dimension because it has a capacity to express universals.[3] Translation, following Aristotle's views, can imitate the poetic capacity of expressing universals when it detects them and translates them.

In Plato, there are three forms of mimesis that interest the theories of translation:[4]

1- Metaphrase: translation of individual words, syntax, figures, forms of the original;
2- Paraphrase: selection or abstraction of the text's most distinctive analysable features;
3- "Improvement": To translate the transcendent reality which underlies the original, the intellectual form, of which even the original is a shadow.

It is to the mimetic theory (largely used in the eighteenth century) that we can attribute "improvement" and "liberties" with the original text, such as omissions, simplifications, beautification, etc. Given these two distinctions, to what extent is the concept of "transcreation" in literary translation not a radicalisation of Plato's third mimetic mode? The original

is but a pretext (and I mean literally, a pre-text) for the creative act of translation itself. What I have named above as "the art of translation" (the "imitation of the artist" position) became radicalised by the Concretist Movement, a poetic movement launched by Haroldo de Campos, Augusto de Campos, Décio Pignatari among other poets (the movement also included musicians and sculptors) in the fifties in São Paulo, Brazil.[5] Under the influence of Ezra Pound, who actually subscribed to Young's views and to the English tradition, the importance of translation and the idea of the Paideuma[6] was emphasised and amplified to include a vast number of writers and poets who had 'made it new' and who had kept literature 'alive,' just to name two of the paradigms of Pound's Paideuma.[7]

Animated by this spirit, Augusto and Haroldo de Campos set out to translate an impressive number of paradigmatic works. They also developed a theory of translation which fused Pound's ideas with other influential theoretical works like the notion of literature as open work, advanced by Umberto Eco in *Opera Aperta*, Jakobson's theories in linguistics, the privilege of synchronicity over diachrony, and the emphasis on aural and visual effects. This theoretical ground enabled Augusto and Haroldo de Campos to propose an inversion of the commonplace motto: *tradutore traditore,* affirming more often than not, that a betrayal of the original was required (meaning: to forego the literal and the meaning involved in the literal) in order to translate the real *meaning* of the work in question. This idea led to the creation of the concept of *transcreation.*[8]

For Augusto and Haroldo de Campos, it was not possible to translate poetry if the translator was not a poet himself because only a poet can read through the original and establish a set of equivalences which, even betraying the literal sense of the original, in the end, becomes a more faithful portrait of this same original. They linked their notion of 'transcreation' to their own definition of Concrete poetry, which seeks to emphasise what they call the verbi-voco-visual qualities of literature, especially poetry. All the formal aspects of the original text intended for translation: sound, shape, rhyme, rhythm, assonances, alliterations, etc. had to be considered and (as it often occurred) took precedence above other aspects such as meaning. Haroldo and Augusto de Campos established a relationship between 'creation' and 'transcreation.' Because this relationship was elaborated within the theory of Concrete poetry, the notion of 'transcreation' found itself limited to that scope. As a consequence, works of literature that had nothing to do with the Concretist movement, when 'transcreated' became uniformly concretist.

Such radical notions, even when representing the high norm of literary translation in Brazil, attracted serious criticism. One of them points out that the theory of concrete poetry, and its verbi-voco-visual elements, interfered in the translations of the Concretist group to such an extent that the whole corpus of poets they translated—poets as different as Li-Po, Guido Cavalcanti, Dante, Fitzgerald, the Provençal Poets, Laforgue, Rimbaud, Mallarmé, Pound, Maiakovsky—sounded as if they were Concrete poets. The excessive emphasis on the formal aspects of 'transcreation' led to an artificial use of language that flattened contextual, historical and cultural nuances which have to be indicated or hinted at in a translation. Trans-historicism does not imply disregard for differences brought by history, time and context.

Yet another limitation of this conception of 'transcreation' is its disregard for content. More often than not, a poem is 'transcreated' by ignoring the centrality of the isomorphism between form and content. They are inseparable. It is not rare in many 'transcreations' that a disregard for the content takes primacy, thus changing a work beyond recognition. The art of translation (which is to find a fine balance between content and form) becomes an obligation to subvert content in order to serve form. At its worst, the conception of 'transcreation' can become programmatic and risk being applied artificially and mechanically to any literary translation independently of other factors. Fluidity and organicism are abandoned in favour of theoretical purity.

Even when we recognise in transcreation a complete dedication of the translator to the *cause* of the *living tradition of poetry*, trying to reach his audience with a poem that sounds fresh and contemporary, we also have to tackle the much less agreeable side of it: the narcissistic insistence from the part of the translator to make his appearance, to play an *active* part in the piece translated and display it. When one translates Dante one also displays one's own ability to translate Dante.

This approach adds a degree of arbitrariness to the work translated that was not part of the original text. 'Trancreation' provokes a form of intervention that distorts the scope and shape of the work it purports to

translate. It also brings into play a seldom discussed notion in literary criticism and translation theory, which concerns what I will broadly call "the ethics of the text." To what extent can a translator 'dispose' of a text? To what extent can translators 'leave their mark' on a text? On the other hand, to what degree can a translation be self-effacing? Is it possible for translators who also wish to be creative to keep their presences in the text as discreet as possible?

Sometimes misunderstandings and exaggerations such as the ones cited above are cultivated due to the phobia of the "literal" and the much maligned "literal translation"—the product of a complete misreading of Horace, who wrote in his *Ars Poetica* that translators *have* to render a translation *word for word* if they want to be faithful.[9] But this Horatian admonition should not be confused with literalism. A literal translation is different from a literalist translation. The latter displays the failure of contexts, history and culture; the former is an attempt at fidelity. And if translations are to be faithful, how can they be literal and creative at the same time?

I believe that if a translation displays a large degree of variance between literal and creative sides it risks becoming a betrayal of the original. It is possible to exert creativity and invention within the confines of fidelity. It is often more difficult too, since it demands from the translator not only a mastery of languages but an insider's understanding of *how* language works. As with literature and art themselves, there is freedom in rules and boundaries. I don't know if it is possible or desirable to create a theory of literary translation based on equivalences and correspondences, both in form and content. We know that these equivalences and correspondences merely indicate the original (almost like a hieroglyph) without completely distorting it. Perhaps our audiences should be better educated on what to expect from translations as well. Only very rarely can they compete with the original, but they can, in some cases, be even better.

In *La supersticiosa ética del lector*, Borges may be offering a consolation when he calls to our attention the fetish of the perfect poem and the perfect page in literature: "The perfect page, the page where no word can be altered without damage is the most precarious of all...Conversely, the page with a vocation for immortality can pass through the fire of erratas, approximate versions, distracted readings and misunderstandings without leaving the soul in the proof." [La página de perfección, la página de la que ninguna palabra puede ser alterada sin daño, es la más precaria de todas... Inversamente, la página que tiene vocación de inmortalidad puede atravesar el fuego de las erratas, de las versiones aproximativas, de las distraídas lecturas, de las incomprensiones, sin dejar el alma en la prueba.][10] If this comes as a relief for us translators, assured that we are of not inflicting permanent damage to the works we set upon, it also has the virtue of liberating us.

As I have stated above, my own position as a translator is to set an acceptable parameter for the rendering of form and content, especially when there is a sharp dissonance between what the original demands and what the target language can offer. That is when it is time to look for sets of "equivalences," "correspondences" and "triangulations". If a sound effect cannot be reproduced at a determined moment because the content is more important *at that point* than the assonance, then the assonance can be created at some other point, without prejudice to the whole. I usually mark my original texts with different colours that represent different functions in the text and I transfer the same pattern of colour to the translated text. If the colours between the original and the translation match, this is a good sign that the translation is not being lost.

The assumption behind this conception is that a translator must be, first and foremost, the *ideal reader* writers and poets seek. It is difficult to be a good translator because anyone in such a position has two very difficult demands to fulfill: to be a formidable reader, and hence a formidable literary critic; and to be as creative as possible within the limits not of his/her own capacities, but within the delineations and limits of the work s/he engages in.

Both capacities come together in the translator. Translators who are not good readers cannot translate well. I insist on this point because so little is written about it and the point is fundamental. Conversely, it is a good thing for literary critics to engage in translation. I have often written about authors I have translated, like Nerval, Swift, Heaney, Joyce, Carlos Drummond de Andrade, João Cabral de Melo Neto, Philip Larkin and others, and I consider the two activities, translation and criticism, as part of one single task, hence inseparable. It has become a habit of mine, that even

when unnecessary, I usually translate large sections of work by writers I am writing critically about, or entire poems, just to test the waters of interpretation, to hear the music of concepts woven in the rhythms of their poetry or prose and verify how and if my own critical interpretations stand against the very grain of the work they are trying to make sense of.

This said, I come back to the other important parameter I use when translating: *triangulation*. It means to regress, even to digress, until we find a common ground from which we can anchor a difficult passage: it may be a common root in a word, or a common cultural trait, or anything that may work as a bridge. As an example, I remember having difficulty with a special passage (among so many others) in Rabelais' *Third Book*, which I translated into Portuguese some years ago. The problem in question offered a non-translatable pun which was essential for the understanding of a whole passage and couldn't be replaced lightly. It involved a plant from which a perfume is extracted (*benjoin*) and a sixteenth-century slang term for the female sexual parts (*mal-joincte*) literally: hardly-closeable. The pun was between the pair of opposites: ben/mal. After weeks of thought and lists of possible renderings, I finally found a solution using the names of two popular flowers in Brazil, both known for their perfume but one of them, because of the libidinous association, acquiring a surprising double-entendre, although the pair ben/mal had to be abandoned. Instead, the Brazilian reader finds two different kinds of ladies: "dama branca" [white lady] and "dama-da-noite" [lady of the night]. The latter is so named because it only smells during the night, but in the new Rabelaisian context, it favoured funny associations with sex and smell.

A less radical example of triangulation also occurred when I had to translate a short story by Flann O'Brien into Portuguese. The title of the story was "The Martyr's Crown," but as in Portuguese we have to disclose the sex of the martyr in question, a literal translation of the title would ruin the whole mystery of the story. The triangular solution was to go back a step and transform "martyr" into "martyrdom," which actually sounded even better in Portuguese, less stilted and more natural, and which conveyed exactly what the title in English wished to convey: "A Coroa do Martírio."

Yet another example came with the difficulty in translating Édouard du Jardin's *Les Lauriers sont coupés*. The title would sound impossible in

Portuguese. Having studied in a French school in Brazil, I knew the nursery rhyme from which the title had been taken and started experimenting with equivalences that did not satisfy for various reasons. I finally settled on a type of triangulation by enlarging the scope of the syntagmal proposition and the title in Portuguese became *A Canção dos Loureiros* [*The Laurel Song*], which conveyed both the laurel symbolism of the title *and* (important for the Brazilian public) an indication of a fact culturally unobtainable for them: that the author had based his title on a French song. In the preface I wrote for the book, I explained the naming of the title and gave in full the song from which the author had taken his title, putting the Brazilian public somehow at the same starting level as the French, who happen to have the rhyme in question as a cultural given.

But is all this any different from what the first lawgiver of English translation, Dryden, wrote when he established some principles of translation? This is his list:

1- Be a poet;
2- Be a master of both languages;
3- Understand the characteristics that individuate the author;
4- Conform your [the translator's] genius to that of the original;
5- Keep the sense "sacred and inviolable" and be literal where gracefulness can be maintained;
6- Make your author appear as "charming" as possible without violating his real character;
7- Be attentive to the verse quality of both the original and your version;
8- Make the author speak the contemporary language he would have spoken;
9- Do not improve the original;
10- Do not follow it so closely that the spirit is lost.[11]

Last but not least, it is my personal view that literary translation can only be performed if we accept as general the conception of language as irony, which means to accept that the displacement between original and translation is a given and that the original will always escape us, as language itself, fortunately, always escapes us. As for when to stop tinkering with our own faulty versions, I can once more quote Borges when he observes that "no puede haber sino borradores. El concepto de *texto*

definitivo no corresponde sino a la religión o al cansancio." [There are only rough drafts. The concept of the *definitive text* only applies to religion or to fatigue.][12]

Notes

1. T.R. Steiner, *English Translation Theory: 1600-1800* (Amsterdam: Van Gorcum, 1975) 49.

2. Jorge Luis Borges, "Pierre Menard, Autor del Quijote." *Ficciones* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1941) 35-48.

3. Aristotle. *Poetics*. Chapter 9, *passim*.

4. I am summarizing some of the ideas about mimesis found in scattered passages in Plato's works: *Republic* III 394e, 396a, 395b, 395d, X 598e, 3-7, 599e, 602b 6-8 et passim, *Sophist* 265b, 268b, 268c et passim, *Cratylus* 423d-e et passim.

5. See *Teoria da Poesia Concreta,* where Haroldo de Campos, Augusto de Campos and Décio Pignatari develop their theory of Concrete Poetry, (São Paulo: Invenção, 1965); *Noigandres* magazine, especially volume 1, 1952.

6. Pound uses the term to define roots of ideas that are put into action (see *ABC of Reading*, passim and *Guide To Kulchur*, passim). The Campos brothers take the term almost as an anthology of the literature that is alive and should be kept alive.

7. See especially *ABC of Reading* (New York: New Directions, 1960) which was translated into Portuguese by the brothers Augusto and Haroldo as *ABC da Literatura,* (São Paulo: Cultrix, 1971). The Brazilian edition had a Paideuma consisting of creative translations (Haroldo de Campos had not developed the concept of 'transcreation' yet) by the brothers Campos, including a masterful translation of Arnaut Daniel's "Donna mi prega."

8. See *A Operação do Texto* (São Paulo: Perspectiva, 1976) by Haroldo de Campos; *Metalinguagem e outras Metas* (São Paulo: Perspectiva, 1967) also by Haroldo de Campos. See also the introductory essays in *Cantares de Ezra Pound* (Brasília: Hucitec, 1983) by Augusto de Campos, Haroldo de Campos and Décio Pignatari; *Mallarmé* (São Paulo: Perspectiva, 1974), by Augusto and Haroldo de Campos and Décio Pignatari; *Os Nomes e os Navios, Homero, Ilíada II.* (Rio de Janeiro: Sette Letras, 1991), by Haroldo de Campos. Other works in translation which offer lengthy comments both at the theoretical and the practical level by Haroldo de Campos include *Panaroma do Finnegans Wake* (São Paulo: Perspectiva, 1970), *Deus e o Diabo no Fausto de Goethe* (São Paulo: Perspectiva, 1981), *Bere'shith* (São Paulo: Perspectiva, 1997), among many others.

9. "nec verbo verbum curabis reddere fidus interpres." Horace, *Ars Poética,* lns. 133-134.

10. Jorge Luis Borges, "La Supersticiosa Ética del Lector." *Discusión* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1957), 48.

11. Dryden, J. *Preface to Ovid's Epistles and Sylviae*. London: Jacob Jonson, 1685 [Microform].

12. Jorge Luis Borges, "Las Versiones Homéricas." *Discusión* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1957), 106.