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The analysis of the translated text

Propositions for an operational protocol

The thoughts I would like to further develop stem from an increasingly felt didactic and interpretation need in the sphere of comparative literature studies, and basically go back to the following question: what strategies can we adopt to analyse and better understand a translated literary work, trying to fully comprehend its crucial mediation role. I will therefore proceed as follows: firstly, I shall look into the subject by making some general considerations, through which the status of the translated text becomes part of an interpretation issue, or better, of a literary reception issue; secondly, I would briefly and schematically suggest an operational protocol to tackle the translated text considering the hybrid nature of the peritextual structure, as well as the constitutive hybridism (authorial, referential, poetical) to be found in a translated text. The protocol is completed by some brief considerations regarding the tool to be used to disclose the translated text.¹

In the field of comparative literature studies, considerations on literary translation, on the status of the text being translated – to be considered within the vast system of literary communication – play a crucial role. By scientific tradition, comparatist methodology is based on the hypothesis that a work should never be deemed an absolute expression; on the contrary, all its different manifestations and relation forms should be taken into consideration. This assumption is the starting point of any comparative approach to literary texts; namely, that any meeting between two or more cultures, mediated by a literary text, should ensure the expression of certain aspects (thematic, linguistic, morphologic, historical and cultural) that would be hard to detect in the same culture. This relation's gap – which necessarily resorts to a plural linguistic universe, should access to the original language be impossible – is bridged by the translation, by the translated text.

We know that human and intellectual contacts, the meetings of cultures through the circulation of ideas and of the texts conveying them, are truly crucial moments for any comparative approach to the

literary text: analysis and interpretation of the literary text pave the way for the discovery of the “Other” and “Otherness”, and from this viewpoint the translated literary text (hence the art of translating) becomes particularly interesting. The translator and the translation actually become linguistic and cultural intermediators and – as envisaged by the polysystem theory, introduced in the seventies by Israeli critic Itamar Even-Zohar – translated literature plays a relevant role in this hypertextual context, in which many different literatures (élite, popular, parareading, translated literature) are reciprocally associated through synchronic and diachronic relations, which become increasingly efficient when the literary system receiving them is young, peripheral and going through a crisis.²

Thus, literary translations (meaning the finished product) – as well as the art of translating literature (the ensemble of choices that such activity brings about, which we will look into shortly) – increasingly permeate the literary universe, under all its aspects.

A first element to be taken into consideration is the fact that literary tradition and the universe lying beneath it – from *editorial* aspects (the text to be translated, the quality of the translation itself and the target readers) to *didactic* and *training* aspects (because a literary text to be translated is included in a programme) – take us back to a specific need, that of analysing, interpreting and disclosing a text, thus making it an important crossroads.

A second element concerns the very action of reading. There are two possible ways. In one way, reading may focus both on the reader’s required comprehension of the text and on a full absorption of the text. Namely, the reader must try to understand the author’s intentions, finding the momentum that sparked the text; besides, such a view of the act of reading is consolidated in the parallel practice pursued by “empirical” readers, who read just for the pleasure of it, trying to identify themselves with given characters and creating a role for themselves in the story (libidinal complicity). On the contrary, a second way suggests there be a gap between the reader and the text: in this case, reading means acknowledging the “otherness” of the text and its author, consequently leading him/her to search for all those elements that make it different, other.

Another aspect is making “reading” relevant. It’s not a matter of making the text’s topic relevant, searching for elements that may interest a contemporary reader. Rather, it is possible to make the text topical through details such as font, typographical marks or text

composition, in order to make the text language truly alive and readable for the contemporary reader. A simple example, taken from the *Preface to the Eighth Edition of The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, which explicitly mentions text “readability”, gives an idea of the issue: “To ease student’s encounter with some works, we have normalized spelling and capitalization in texts up to and including the Romantic period – for the most part they now follow the conventions of Modern English; we leave unaltered, however, texts in which such modernizing would change semantic or metrical qualities”.³

These general assumptions – which may I point out stem from didactical and professional conclusions – require some further refinement when it comes to translations.

The mere question “has the text I am planning to work on been translated?” brings at least three considerations into play.

1. There is only one translation. It’s the case of recent works, whose translation is protected by copyright. It may be the case of a translation under the form of a volume before being republished as part of an economical series (the benefit in this case is that the translation exploits its communicative nature, reaching a vast public owing to the low cost of the book). The risk is that the monopoly this translation enjoys often doesn’t guarantee the quality of the final product.
2. There are several translations. In this case it is possible to refer to the most recent ones. The example I’ll mention regards two translations into Italian of *To the Lighthouse* (1927) by Virginia Woolf: *Gita al faro* (1934) is the translation by Giulia Celenza and *Al faro* (1992) is the translated version of Nadia Fusini.⁴

The translation by Mrs. Fusini greatly focuses on the redefinition of the *genre* Virginia Woolf dedicated herself to in those years, considering the author’s attempt to shift from a “novel” to “elegy”.⁵ Such a shift requires a different interpretation of the symbology used and making the writing style a sort of “offer” to the inspirer, the illuminating beacon of a knowledge that reveals itself at the end of journey that will actually never happen. The “To” in the original title expresses a dative value, “offering to the lighthouse”. In the case in point the translation is therefore linked to the need to define the *genre*.

Mrs. Celenza’s translation, on the other hand, never questions the fact that we are reading a novel that epitomises a path towards discovery, which gradually consolidates through a complex memory retrieval

and re-interpretation of the present, according to facts and previous situations. If we were to use a term of Jungian psychoanalysis we could call it a *path of individuation*, a journey, a trip “to the lighthouse”, using the Woolf’s words. The word “To” in this case expresses the concept of moving, “going towards a place”, indeed, a journey towards the lighthouse.

The differences between the two versions of this novel are relevant, both in terms of how the literary *genre* is perceived and in terms of the suggested interpretation (strong lyricism in the former, path of individuation in the latter).

3. There is no translation. Sometimes, translations may be included in a collective volume, where only the editor’s name appears. This occurs rather often and it proves how fragile – actually, statutory in this case – translators and translations are. Having an official translation could be a solution...

We notice that translating, or working on a translated text, are very thorny activities because they carry several factors, both within and outside the text, but above all, because the work being translated remains inevitably associated to the original text. Reading a translated text is therefore something extremely stratified, and it is on this very palimpsest nature that the cultural interpretation of the translated work is based. The translated work, being the result of three metamorphosis processes – linguistic transposition, cultural transfer and foreign reappropriation – expresses an ingrained duality between the original and the other it voices. Such a condition is expressed both amid the meshes of the translated text (textual hybridism) and through the peritext going with it (peritextual hybridism).

As I was saying before, because of these reasons I will now try to draft an analysis protocol scheme that, may I remind you, is not meant to be a final, exhaustive response to an issue whose extent requires a much more thorough research. However, I will point out some interesting aspects regarding this type of exercise, going through them and dwelling more upon some of them.

1. Peritextual Hybridism

The starting point shall be the much-mentioned spurious, hybrid nature of a text being translated. From this viewpoint, as Gérard Genette said, a text being translated is the “threshold” lying between different universes. It’s the privileged literary space in which the variations between the original text and the translated text take place;

it is through this process that cultures can truly be interpreted.⁶ From this viewpoint, the translated text is a strong expression of written mediation, a process that gives shape to the linguistic, semiotic, aesthetic and cultural differences existing between two universes that come in touch through text mediation. Peritextual hybridism regards anything that lies outside the text, yet being somewhat linked to the text, helping us interpret it. For example, references to the linguistic or cultural field of the original text, which may affect both the editorial and metatextual spheres.

• **Editorial sphere** (publisher; collection; type of publication: independent volume, anthology, review; illustrations, back cover blurb). I shall dwell upon a couple of considerations: a) the Publisher and the role of Collections of foreign literature and b) Front Cover and Back Cover, leaving aside other factors.

a) Let's say straight away that the position of foreign literature in a publisher's catalogue indicates the principles that drive his publishing policy. The trend – now a reality – among the foremost generalist publishers is that of integrating translated texts in the Series of their catalogues, without making a clear distinction, starting from the source language. This kind of policy presents translated texts requiring no literary or scientific bond (literature, history, philosophy, essays).

Other publishers make more specific choices and publish texts regarding particular sectors and specific linguistic ranges. In Italy this is the case of the Publisher Iperborea – a real icon of the North – which, in the late eighties, started a translation policy in Italy to spread Nordic literatures and Flemish and Estonian fiction with a Series specifically dedicated to them; recently, this Publisher has introduced a Series of translated literary criticism.

Therefore, every translated text in the publishers' world stands where two fundamental axes intersect, the symbolic place of translation: the horizontal axis of foreign separation (the text is given value in its foreignizing identity) and the vertical axis of its canonisation (the text is incorporated in the tradition of the culture receiving it). These policies differ from the concept of national or foreign literature, which influences the act of reading.

b) Both Front Cover and Back Cover represent the peritextual aspect through which one mostly perceives the extent of a “product for the market”, an aspect the text cannot escape. Here the expectations of the reader, his/her imagination with reference to specific cultural differences, play a conditioning role.

Covers play a crucial transmission role, conveying cultural images,

and their analysis is part of the translating process that regards the text on the whole.

Sometimes the literary *genre* is printed on the cover – the publisher does this to classify the translated work, thus providing a “forced” link between the *genres* of the target literary system and the *genres* of the source literary system. By doing so, the source text is made available to the public the translated text turns to, therefore not only by means of the translation, but through a shared and familiar literary model, even if all this might yield distorted effects.

The foreign reader’s first impressions, hence his/her expectations, especially when he/she has not a specific knowledge both of the considered author and of his literary production, stem from the front cover, back cover and jacket flap.

• **Metatextual sphere** (title; introduction; foreword or afterword, notes, glossaries or other).

Even in this case, I will dwell briefly upon a few considerations regarding the relevance of the title. It is the reader’s very first approach towards the translated text, the foreign reader’s interest is drawn through the very title.

The personality of the text is immediately expressed through the title, which somehow represents its identity. The title of the translated text should suit a given cultural ambit, a given public, and it should follow the public and culture’s conventions or expectations when trying to naturalise – not fix – the identity of the text, possibly resorting to the intertextuality network. As you may guess, there are several typologies of titles, suitable for a rich taxonomy: titles may be literally translated, modified, transformed, retranslated, there may be double titles, titles of collections, of anthologies in translation, all of which may be purveyors of peculiarity.

Two quick examples:

a) the translation into Italian of the short story *Last Rites* (1976) written by the Irishman Neil Jordan. The title is apparently devoid of particular complexities, yet there are two translated versions of it: *Estrema unzione* (Extreme Unction) – which I undertook in 1999 – and *Ultimi riti* (literally: last rites) dating 1994. In the former, the polysemic connotation of the terms used in the source language emphasises the ritual, sacral element of the act that occurs in the dramatic vicissitude of death of a catholic Irish carpenter, whereas the latter, neutral version tends to neglect this aspect, focusing more on a monosemic literalness for the target language. This asymmetry between

the monosemy and polysemy of languages sets some limits that the translated title tries to overcome.⁷

b) *Freelander* (2010) is the translation in the Italian version of the novel of the same title by Miljenko Jergovic, a Serbian. In this case, the title and the image on the book cover give us several interpretation choices: journey towards freedom, journey through nature (the image of the Volvo car, a brand that can be associated with large spaces and nature, appearing on the front cover seems to suggest this association); the word itself has several semantic “outlets” (freedom, subject, territory, mobility). The title doesn’t reveal the nature of the text, which remains a mystery to the reader. The back cover blurb promptly plays its role, providing the reader with the information on this complex, existential *on the road* novel.⁸

The title is a sort of outpost of the translated text, synthesising a series of complex processes that typically come about when translating a literary text: faithfulness (as far as possible) to the original text; linguistic and/or cultural untranslatability; improvement of the original text through the translations.

2. Textual hybridism

The translated text reveals its hybrid nature on at least three different levels: authorial, referential, poetic. In this case too I will just provide a couple of examples to illustrate the critical analysis.

a) **Authorial Hybridism.** In all texts being translated there are at least two authors: the author of the original text and the translator/s. All of the author’s thoughts or statements in his/her text are extremely important when analysing the text, just as the register adopted by the translator for his/her translation (introductory notes, infratextual notes, etc). The awareness of the literary text being translated is always mediated by the interpretation of the translator, whose cultural familiarity, educational background and theoretical stance regarding translation play a crucial role.

We know there is often a fruitful dialogue between author and translator, as proven by several written testimonies, such as private correspondence, notes and forewords, which provide the translator and the readers with further interpretation tools. A clear example is the one given by Umberto Eco for *Dire quasi la stessa cosa*. He presents a series of examples through which it is possible to observe how Eco cooperates with his French, Spanish, Portuguese, Russian and German translators and how this cooperation becomes part of the literary creation process (here, the future translation actually affects the genesis of the text) and

a sparking element of a productive interaction for the creation and translation of a text.⁹

b) **Referential Hybridism.** In this case the hybridism concept is part of a cultural reflection. The hybrid nature of the text is unveiled by all those references (typographical, notes) that explicitly refer to the original text and its cultural roots: xenisms, onomastics, *realia* lie beneath the literary images that take cue from the culture or country where the source language is spoken.

When passing from one language to another, these cultural references lose some of their enunciative efficacy: what, through them, was implicit in the source language, no longer is in the target language. This is where notes come into play, and they become increasingly necessary as the cultural gap between the two linguistic universes grows wider.

A simple example allows us to understand how relevant this issue is. The challenge, for all translations, is to respect the relation proper nouns have with other signs and symbols (onomastic and non), which in turn participate in constructing the meaning of the original work. Now, practice has it that some toponyms should be translated into the foreign language (Rome, Paris, London, Stockholm) for they recall a specific identity in the reader's mind, whereas the names of streets, piazzas, etc. may or may not be translated, depending on the contexts. For example, take the detective novel by Swedish authors Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö, *Mannen som gick upp i rök* (*The man who went up in smoke – L'uomo che andò in fumo*). In the Italian translation, terms such as *torg* (*square*), *gata* (*street*), *holme* (*islet*), and many more are not translated; the original wording is kept, with the names associated with them: Karl XII Torg, Gustav Adolf Torg, Saltsjön, Skärholmen, St. Eriksgatan, Västerberga Allé, and even people's names (Stenström, Matsson, Wallenberg, etc.) plunge the Italian reader into an alien, puzzling universe, and the reader overcomes these distances by means of the references.¹⁰

c) **Poetic Hybridism.** In this case the reference is aesthetic. Hybridism takes place on the foreign intertext (to be made out of allusions and quotations, under several forms), the presence of vernacular or foreign languages that play an extremely important textual role. Translating vernacular language, namely the expression of closely-knit, restricted communities within a broader sociolinguistic system and dialects – e.g. Tornedal Finnish, spoken in northern Sweden; Italian regional dialects, often supported by remarkable literature (Goldoni, Trilussa, Camilleri), argots (linguistic variety belonging to a restricted social class) – means

the translator is directly facing the social element of the language, with its orality and characteristics that require solutions that are culturally and linguistically consistent.

Under such conditions, every modern translation must take into account the sociolinguistic issues set forth by the text, and should try to recreate, in the translated text, a linguistic tension restoring this type of relation.

In the case of cultural contexts in which a non-official plurilingualism exists (for example United States with English and Spanish), using, in the literary text, vernacular languages associated with African American or Hispanic communities actually acquires an identifying or racial value, which cannot be reproduced in the translated text by using the so-called sociolects (a social class' typical jargon), rather by inscribing the text in creolisation or Negritude poetics (historical traditions, cultural values of the African Americans).

May I remind you that the project for the drafting of an operational protocol to analyse texts being translated should pay the due attention to the aspects supporting the spreading of the translated text, because the way through which we discover a text affects our reading and interpretation. The volume seems to offer the solid support of the paratext, yet it may also hinder or modify other aspects. The journal's versatility (selection of short texts and/or modern excerpts) is to be appreciated. The anthology allows us to "reinvent" the text, placing it in thematic and historical contexts, thus highlighting the relevant textual aspects. The bilingual anthology further boosts the possibility of enjoying the foreign text, allowing it to be discovered alongside the original text. The paths our imagination is indicated by the multimedia facet can further widen our reading and interpretation range.

Concluding, I think that the suggested schematisations, albeit necessarily brief, have given an idea of how complex and relevant this type of interpretation is. This protocol – ambitiously defined an "analysis protocol" – has a practical purpose, just like all other protocols: that of providing an interpretation path according to a model that, never forgetting the central role of the text's literariness, reasonably looks towards an interdisciplinary horizon, helping reconsider the teaching of foreign literatures. In a time in which literary phenomena are going global, having the rights keys to access the communication dynamics of a text being translated can help better comprehend the mechanisms involved in the construction and expression of cultures.

Notes

¹ In this research field a fundamental study is: Yves Chevrel (éd.), *Enseigner les œuvres littéraires en traduction, Actes, du séminaire national organisé par la direction générale de l'Enseignement scolaire, Foyer des lycéennes*, 23–24 novembre 2006, Académie de Versailles, CRDP, coll. «Les Actes de la Dgesc», 2007.

² Itamar Even-Zohar, “Polysystem Theory”, in *Poetics Today*, I, 1979, 1–2, pp. 287–310; id., “La posizione della letteratura tradotta all’interno del polisistema letterario”, (1978), trad. it., in S. Nergaard (a cura di), *Teorie contemporanee della traduzione*, Milano 1995.

³ Stephen Greenblatt (ed.), *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, vol., I, New York 2006, p. XL.

⁴ Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* [1927]; Italian translations: *Gita al faro*, Milano 1934; *Al faro*, Milano 1992.

⁵ Virginia Woolf, *A Writer's Diary* [1953–1954], trad. it., *Diario di una scrittrice*, Roma 2009, pp. 118–119.

⁶ Gérard Genette, *Seuils*, Paris 1987.

⁷ Neil Jordan, “Last Rites”, in *Night in Tunisia*, London 1976. Italian translations: “Ultimi Riti” in *Panta*, 13, 1994, pp. 268–276; “Estrema unzione” in Paolo Proietti, *Irlandesi*, Palermo, 1999, pp. 157–169.

⁸ Miljenko Jergovic, *Freelander*, Sarajevo/Zagreb 2007; Italian translation: *Freelander*, Rovereto 2010.

⁹ Umberto Eco, *Dire quasi la stessa cosa*, Milano 2003.

¹⁰ Maj Sjöwall, Per Wahlöö, *Mannen som gick upp i rök*, Stockholm 1966; Italian translation: *L'uomo che andò in fumo*, Palermo, 2009.