



On the absolute need to betray: meeting in translation

by Teresa Salema Cadete

By formulating a “betrayal” accusation, we should ask ourselves by the same token from which standpoint we are talking or writing. In the century of contingency, some essentialist claims could be implicit in such a kind of label applied to someone or something.

If “anything goes” at least since Cole Porter’s genial musical, composed 80 years ago, the binomial *traduttore=traditore* has no more reason to exist than a huge number of essentialist proposals that we hear or read every moment: it is enough, for instance, to find some critics within the realm of the present crisis in which “we” are supposed to be involved in a higher or a lower degree. Financial crisis, political crisis (most of all since the last European elections on the 25th of May), crisis of intellectual and moral values, etc., in all such paradigms “we” are supposed to be more or less concerned. But in whose name are such issues supposed to be dealt?

A similar procedure seems to be followed when someone writes on collective identity issues. Ten years ago, a Portuguese philosopher named José Gil published an essay called – translating the title – *Portugal Today. The Fear of Existing*. The main thesis says that the fragility of the Portuguese democracy is connected with the incapacity to make “inscriptions” into the public realm which should be expressive enough to leave “marks”. As a result, one could see “the strange image of a people with a background of barbarianism wrapped in numberless layers of culture (from Greek and Latin paganism up to Celts and Arabs) that are unable to change completely such a background into civilization” (José Gil. *Portugal Hoje. O Medo de Existir*. Lisboa: Relógio d’Água 2004, p. 107-8).

Without intending to be polemical, I might say that the author, similarly to many authors who seem to have no problem in formulating such broad – better: heavy, or even crushing – generalizations, has a translation problem. In fact, translation is deepening a competence to particularize, therefore to grasp the specific features of a text. Nobody else than the allegedly essentialist Martin Heidegger adverts that one does not have, does not possess language. We all – yes, here we may generalize – dwell in language.

If we live in language, we also breathe it, yet in many different ways. While translating, we proceed as if we should inhale in one language and exhale in another one. This happens rather with simultaneous interpretation. With written translation things are different. Yet this breathing metaphor keeps being a suitable approach to the perspective that I would like to discuss. According to the Western civilization patterns, the proper distance that should be kept between individuals talking to each other in a modern, informal society would correspond to a breathe length, that means, the indispensable distance that allows to look into the other’s eyes without disturbing her or him with personal body odours.

An ideal translation is in my opinion much like that. Any translation should display its *betrayal* towards the original by *coexisting* with it. Any translation should therefore be published in a

bilingual edition. This seems to be indispensable and non discussable for poetry - such a form of *meeting in translation* by controlling (and enjoying) at the same time the variations and options as degrees of such a *betrayal*.

What is at stake is no more and no less than the "modest mystery of literature" (J.-L. Borges) and the "perpetual change of language" (G. Steiner). If grammar and vocabulary are supposed to be felt as the "living membrane" (G. Steiner) that supports a balanced choice of translation options, such a balance has precisely two plates. And such plates - original and translated text - should always be displayed, if possible, side by side. Again, it is not a matter of doing this with long texts within a single book. We are aware of such impossibility. Yet if such a method is ideal for poetry, it also works on one hand for all kinds of short texts. On the other hand, and concerning longer texts yet with a literary quality, how many of us do not possess in the own library novels in the original version standing by a translated one, *seulement pour le plaisir du texte*?

Here I come to my point. Such a text pleasure has proved to be a powerful form of getting acquainted with the Otherness. From the perspective of the reader, the gap between both languages soon becomes a link, a bridge between the well-known and the apparently unknown. As well as a detour over the foreign language brings us back to a sharper perception of the specificity of our own language, this translation procedure may show us, both as translators and as readers, how to deal with potential conflicts. After the war of languages, the peace of texts arrives at the end.

Yet this is not an automatic process. The indispensable experience of distance - even as a coexistence on two pages side by side - does not always bring the aimed balance, most of all when the difference between the two languages is too relevant, as for instance Spanish-Chinese. We may imagine the pleasure that a Portuguese reader experiences by reading a bilingual edition of a Catalan text side by side with the Portuguese translation. Can we therefore conclude that such a method only works within the Indo-European language family? I would answer: yes and no. If for a reader of a Catalan-Portuguese bilingual edition the pleasure is practically immediate, by recognizing the evident similarities, a reader of a bilingual edition of a Spanish text and its Chinese translation needs time. Space distance and time delay have a mutual, proportional relationship. The structural differences between such languages may never be overcome (if we suppose that the Spanish native speaker does not understand Chinese). What can yet be done is to switch into a loud reading, therefore into the orality experience, thus passing the proof of listening to the Other, just for the sake of listening to a music that comes from far away but is also included in a frame which is accepted. Taking time to listen to a music that comes from far away - is this not also a noble purpose of every translation?

Back to the world of (not poetic) prose, which Goethe feared at the beginning of the XIXth Century and which surrounds us nowadays, let me present an example of the possibility of subversive translation on public posters. As you may know, the Portuguese administration has forced in official writings and school programs the use of a perverted "grafelect" according to a so-called *Orthographic Agreement for the Portuguese Language*, ratified and implemented in less of half of all Portuguese speaking countries. The long history of illegality and unconstitutionality of the process has already been the object of two resolutions, presented by the TLRC to the PEN International Assembly, where they have been unanimously approved.

Well, you may imagine the indignation of many language lovers when they see, on posters near historical monuments, the explanations in English next to a "translation" in that "grafelect", which I should simply call a double betrayal. How can a language lover allow that a sentence with the English words "act" and "reception" happens to be translated with the (not Portuguese) words "ato" and "recepção"? Yet let me tell you how huge the temptation is to add a C (acto) and a P (recepção) with a correction PEN that such language lovers always carry with them... and how easy it is, not to

resist. Acting in such a way, this language lover may also help school children to make further mistakes by learning English in a too close way to that "grafelect", which is unhappily already happening.

But there is no sad end. Resistance is growing stronger and stronger and the joy of creating overwhelms that dictatorship of "language economics". Thanks to dialectics of life and literature, we can always meet in translation. And thanks for giving me this opportunity.

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