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FLARR PAGES #42

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-*El soldador
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"The Most Intimate Act of Reading: On the Translation of *El soldador de los trópicos* by Vicente Cabrera Funes," James Wojtaszek, University of Minnesota, Morris

The title of this piece is taken from an article on the "politics of translation" by philosophy professor and postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak. I chose it because for me it concisely and most effectively described the complexity of translation in its many dimensions. For many in our culture, and certainly in other cultures as well, the concept of translation is simplified and often misunderstood as a more or less mechanical process of taking words and phrases from one language and locating equivalent words and expressions in another, producing a copy of the original that is readily understood in the new language. Those who have dedicated years to the study of language, or who have perhaps been translators, have a far different understanding of the process. Spivak's brief definition, actually only an aside in a longer statement about a specific translation she had done, summarized for me one of the most essential elements of the process—an intimate engagement with the text, and all that is contained within, between, and beyond its lines. I do not mean by this statement to "re-mystify" the text after generations of theorists have worked so hard to do the opposite. I simply suggest that translation brings to the text all of the critical and interpretive apparatus that effective reading does, with the added responsibility of effectively rendering the text to a new audience that would not have access to it in its original form. How such work is done "effectively" has long been a question and subject for debate, changing perhaps as often as our methods of reading and understanding literature. But it is, in any case, anything but mechanical or dispassionate; it is, as described by Mary Louise Pratt, "both a science and a poetics."

In his book *The Scandals of Translation*, published in 1998, Lawrence Venuti offers some insight into the logistics and economics of translation worldwide. I doubt these statistics have changed drastically in the last few years:

Since WWII, English has remained the most translated language worldwide, but one of the least translated into. The translations issued by British and American publishers currently comprise about two to four percent of their total output each year...while in other foreign countries, large and small, East and West, the percentage tends to be significantly higher: 6 percent in Japan, 10 in France, 14 in Hungary, 15 in Germany. In 1995 Italian publishers issued 40,429 volumes, 25 percent of which were translations; English towered over the other source languages....This asymmetry in translation patterns ensures that the United States and the United Kingdom enjoy a hegemony over foreign countries that is not only simply political and economic, ... but cultural as well. (88)

This statement, and indeed Venuti's study in general, ask us to think beyond the immediate issues of translating any given text, placing the concept of translation into a broader context of intercultural relations which have real consequences that are cultural, political, and economic. In many ways, English-speaking culture's limited understanding, and limited curiosity about translation, tend to perpetuate the sort of cultural imbalance that Venuti describes, erasing the presence and continued importance of translation.

Eliot Weinberger, perhaps best known for his translations of the Mexican poet Octavio Paz, reminds us that translation is necessary "for the obvious reason that one's own language has only created, and is creating, a small fraction of the world's most vital books." (Pratt 29) This "obvious" situation, however, is often overlooked. And, as Venuti also convincingly argues, even when it is recognized, as in the case of the numerous translations that have become part of the Western literary canon and incorporated into the university curriculum, it is often done by erasing the presence and history of translation within this process of assimilation. That is, many classical and contemporary texts taught by necessity in translation to

English-speaking students are essentially presented as though they were indeed written in the language at hand, or as though the fact that they have been translated is worth little or no mention. This is perhaps based on an assumption of trust in the translators, but such an approach is a disservice to the student-readers of these texts. Venuti argues in his book for a “pedagogy of translation,” which on the one hand complicates the task of reading these texts, but at the same time enriches curriculum by helping students to be “both self-critical and critical of exclusionary cultural ideologies by drawing attention to the situatedness of texts and interpretations.” For Venuti, “Recognizing a text as translated and figuring this recognition into classroom interpretations can teach students that their critical operations are limited and provisional, situated in a specific cultural situation, in a curriculum, in a particular language. And with the knowledge of limitations comes the awareness of possibilities, different ways of understanding the foreign text, different ways of understanding their own cultural moments” (93).

Mary Louise Pratt, whose work has been both thorough and compelling, also asks us to consider the broader questions and consequences regarding translation as a linguistic, cultural, and intercultural practice. By expanding the notion of translation far beyond the literary, and through her use of terms like “traffic in meaning” and “transculturation” to talk about translation, she reminds us that it is never a simple, one-directional process. By analyzing the role of translation in the colonization of Latin America, for example, she demonstrates that the process can have a range of ramifications, from cultural exchange and mediation to violence and obliteration.

These and other theorists of translation remind us of the need for a broader, more complex understanding in our culture and in our educational institutions. But from here, as time is limited, I’d like to return to the more immediate question of translating a text, a specific text, and some of the issues, questions, challenges and solutions it entailed. In his explanation of the translation of poetry, Eliot Weinberger suggests that the purpose of translation is not “to give the poet a voice in the translation-language. It is to allow the poem to be heard in the translation language, ideally in many of the same ways in which it is heard in the original language.” This means, then, that “the primary task of the translator is not merely to get the dictionary meanings right – which is the easy part – but rather to invent a new music for the text in the translation-language, one that is mandated by the original though not a technical replication of the original” (Pratt 29). And while again this definition smacks a little bit of the mystification I try to avoid when dealing with literature, I think it effectively describes one of the most important, and challenging, tasks of the translator. It is from this context that I approached the translation of *El soldador de los trópicos*; a brief excerpt of this translation will appear later.

Works Cited

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