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Bakhtinian Dialogics in Translation Theory

If we understand ‘fidelity’, in the translation relation among texts, in terms of *creativity* and *interpretation*, and not just of imitation, repetition, reproduction of the original text, a literal copy in another language, the translating text must establish a relation of alterity with the text object of translation. The greater the distancing in terms of *dialogic alterity* between two texts, the greater is the possibility of creating an artistic reinterpretation through another sign interpretant in the potentially infinite semiotic chain of deferrals from one sign to the next, to which belongs the so-called ‘original.’

To be an adequate interpretant of the original text, as for any interpretant, the translating text must not only repeat the interpreted, but must establish a relation of ‘answering comprehension,’ to say it with Mikhail M. Bakhtin, a relation of dialogic, creative and responsible distancing, of dialogic alterity (see Bakhtin 1963, 1965, 1975, 1990). The translator’s interpretive capacity in terms of creativity is directly proportional to the capacity of “answering comprehension. We can also claim that the translation and the original do not relate to each other on the basis of deduction: it is not the case that given a certain original text, a certain translation must inevitably derive from it. This is no different from our previous statement: in other words, the translating text is not connected to the original by a relation of necessity, of cause and effect. The translating text can exist autonomously from the original text, detaching itself from it. At the same time, the relation between the translating text and the original text is not purely conventional and a result of a mere decodification. To describe the interpreted-interpretant relation in the interlingual translative process in such terms is to fall prey to the fallacy that the transition from one historical-natural language to another, from one linguistic convention to another simply implies transferral of the same meaning into different signifiers. In effect, it is not a question of the ‘same’ meaning transiting from the original text to the translating text. As anticipated, the translating text must attempt a relation of answering comprehension with respect to the original. Even more interesting is that the meaning of the original is in fact determined and decided in this type of interpretive work and remains unvaried until another translation, another interpretation

proposes a different interpretant, a different translating, thereby enhancing its meaning. The translation must resemble the original. But resemblance does not obstruct the capacity for inventiveness, creativity and autonomy with respect to the original text, but, on the contrary, is the very condition for this. A translation can make different claims and have different aspirations: it may simply accompany the original text word by word, or at the other extreme it may recreate the original text in another language and succeed brilliantly to the point that the translation has value in itself – in the case of a literary text, whether in prose or poetry, it may even reach such high levels in aesthetic value as to become an artwork in itself. The type of interpreted-interpretant relation that best renders the character of translation is the “dialogic”.

Just as we tend to believe that in a sequence that repeats itself that which comes first causes that which comes later, as observed by David Hume, and that these two terms are connected by a relation of necessity, in the same way we tend to believe that the order of a text is necessary and unchangeable, especially when we are familiar with the text, when we practice the text according to given frames and habits. This line of thought may lead one to the conclusion that any change in a text is a sacrilege. The text can only be that text, therefore its translation — any form of translation — in the last analysis is a fake.

Let us take the case of a reader in the habit of reading Dante’s *Divine Comedy* in Italian. *Inferno* can only begin with the line “Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita” and variants are not appreciated — not only in the sense of transposition and transferral into another language, but even in the form of paraphrase in the same language. On the contrary, for a reader unfamiliar with ancient Greek, the *Odyssey* is available in numerous different variants, none of which are referred to an original as the criterion for evaluating fidelity – and yet we are discussing translations. Nor does it make any difference whether these variants are in prose or in verse. Consider the Homeric texts. In Italy, Vincenzo Monti’s translation of the *Iliad* carries out the role of original, especially for those whom encountered this translation for the first time during early school days and have continued reading it, to the point of not wanting to recognize any other version that is not Monti’s. And yet, on Ugo Foscolo’s account, Monti was not worth much as a scholar of ancient Greek! Indeed, it seems that his translation derives from other translations, rather than from the original. Foscolo apostrophizes Monti as the “Traduttore dei traduttori d’Omero.”

Evoking Zeno's riddle about Achilles and the tortoise, let us ask the following question (Achilles can never overtake the tortoise because the tortoise has always advanced beyond the point where it first was when Achilles reaches that point): is swift-footed Achilles (who can never reach the slow tortoise) similar to a skillful and relevant translation? The "relevant translation," like Achilles, is committed to reaching the original, which, like the tortoise, has the only advantage of having taken off first, of starting first. However, precisely because of this advantage and similarly to the relation between Achilles and the tortoise, the translation cannot reach the original text. In any case, we need to remember that the *logoi* or argumentations used by Zeno of Elea to deny movement, change and becoming (like the riddle about Achilles and the tortoise or the other riddle about the arrow) were ultimately intended to support Parmenides and his thesis about unchangeable unity against the existence of plurality. Parmenides confuted the idea of the plurality and asserted the idea of unity, he introduced the concept of being and asserted that being is one (on Zeno's riddles, cf. Colli 1998). Under a certain aspect, the thesis that asserts that only one is possible, only unity, can be connected to the question of translation. Confutation of the plurality, of the multiplicity can be applied to common views about the relation between that which is considered as the unique original text and that which are considered its many translations. From our point of view, it is important to underline that Zeno's confutation of the plurality, as reported by Plato in *Parmenides*, is based on the notion of similarity, that is to say, on the same notion generally invoked to explain the relation between the text and its translations.

Even if a translation is simply a text "rewritten" in the same language, obviously it is not identical to the original (not even Pierre Menard's *Quijote* by comparison to Miguel de Cervantes's *Quijote*; on this account see the paper by Borges entitled, "Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote," 1939b). If a translation were totally similar to its original, it would be identical, simply another copy of the same text. But a translation must be at once similar and dissimilar, the same other. This is the paradox of translation, which is the paradox of multiplicity. To admit that translation is possible is to admit that something can be at once similar and dissimilar (and) which is a real contradiction. We could resort to Zeno's argumentations, as reported in Plato's *Parmenides* (127d-128e), and deny existence of the many, at once similar and dissimilar. That is, we could demonstrate that the idea of a text existing at once as the original text and as the translation text, is absurd. Following this line of reasoning, and considering that it is impossible for the not-similar to be similar and for the similar to be

not-similar, it would also be impossible for translations to exist given the conditions of impossibility.

Instead, expressed in terms of the paradox of Achilles and the tortoise, the “paradox of translation” consists in the fact that in order to reach the object-text in translation, the translating text must somehow recover the former’s advantage of being first from the very start. With reference to Achilles and the tortoise, as reported by Aristotle in *Physics* (239b: 14-20), the argument is that in a race the quickest runner can never overtake the slowest, since the pursuer must first reach the point from where the pursued started, so that the slower must always hold a lead. This argument is the same in principle as the paradox about the flying arrow: the arrow will never reach its goal because it must move across the infinite halves of the segment in a trajectory, where the segments are divisible ad infinitum. But in Achilles’s argument the distance which remains to be covered each time he attempts to reach the tortoise is not successively divided into halves.

Borges formulates this argument in slightly different terms (cf. “La perpetua carrera de Aquiles y la tortuga,” 1932b, and “Avatares de la tortuga,” 1939a): Achilles is ten times faster than the tortoise, therefore in the race he gives it a ten metre advantage. But if Achilles runs ten times faster than the tortoise, it follows that while Achilles runs a metre, the tortoise runs a decimetre; while Achilles runs a decimetre, the tortoise runs a centimetre; while Achilles runs a centimetre, the tortoise runs a millimetre, and so forth ad infinitum. Therefore, swift-footed Achilles will never reach the slow tortoise. Borges reports and examines various attempts at confuting Zeno of Elea’s paradox: that proposed by Thomas Hobbes, Stuart Mill (*System of logic*), Henri Bergson (“*Essay upon the immediate data of consciousness*”), William James (*Some Problems of Philosophy*) who maintained that Zeno’s paradox is an attack not only on the reality of space, but also on the more invulnerable and subtle reality of time, and lastly Bertrand Russell (*Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy, Our Knowledge of the External World*), being the only attempt Borges considers worthy of the ‘original’ in terms of argumentative force. Of the ‘original’ is placed in inverted commas because all these successive argumentations are variants or translations of the primary text, in so far as they compete with Zeno’s paradox and attempt to equal it in argumentative ability.

Pierre Menard, author of *Quijote*, also turns his attention to the riddle of Achilles and the tortoise. And Borges dedicates a short story to Menard, included in *Ficciones*, which is just as paradoxical. In the story, Menard’s *Quijote* is listed among his works as

Les problèmes d'un problème, dated Paris 1917. Menard discusses different solutions, in chronological order, to the 'Achilles' paradox, and in the second edition cites the following advice from Leibniz in the epigraph: "Ne craignez point, monsieur, la tortue." Why should we fear the slow tortoise? Because of its advantage, because of the distancing, the time-lapse separating it in space and time, like a gulf, from swift-footed Achilles. To fear the tortoise is to fear translation because of the original, which has the advantage of coming first. The text which translates the original inevitably comes second. To fear the original and faithfully respect it: Menard decides that he will not just compose another Quijote, but the Quijote, the unique, the original Quijote. Of course, it was not just a question of imitating or copying the original. This would have meant to propose the advantage of the original once again, making of *Quijote*, as composed by Menard, a second text. Menard had a sacred fear of the original, however he did not fear producing pages that coincided word by word with the words of Cervantes. Menard succeeded in composing chapters IX and XXXVIII from the first part of *Quijote*. What was his expedient? After having excluded the idea of competing with Cervantes identifying with his life, times, biographical context, and reaching *Quijote*, having in a sense become Cervantes (who was decidedly at an advantage simply because he had undertaken to write the same artwork much earlier), Menard decided that the greater challenge was to reach *Quijote* while remaining Menard, through his own experience as Menard.

Menard's *Quijote* (a fragmentary work of art, one had to be immortal to bring it to completion) is only "verbally identical" to Cervantes's *Quijote*. To prove the difference, in his short story Borges cites a passage from *Quijote* by Cervantes (Part I, Chapter IX) and the corresponding passage from *Quijote* by Menard. Even though these two passages correspond by the letter, the version by Menard, a contemporary of Williams James, clearly resounds with pragmatist overtones. Unlike Cervantes, for Menard, historical truth, discussed in exactly the same terms in both passages, is not what happened but what we judge happened. Achilles can recover the tortoise's advantage and overtake it simply because it was he who gave the tortoise an advantage, even if it started first, it was he who let the tortoise be first. All things considered, it is the tortoise that depends on Achilles, and Achilles who thanks to his generosity for giving the tortoise an advantage in fact beats it, supercedes it. Time also plays its part. The style of Menard's *Quijote* is inevitably archaic and affected, while Cervantes's

Quijote is updated and with the times with respect to the Spanish language as it was spoken in his own day.

It is clear then that the paradox of translation is the paradox of the text and of the sign. Indeed, if the question of similarity is central to translation (an International Conference on “Similarity and Difference in Translation,” was organized in New York, in 2001, see Arduini and Hodgson 2004), it is not less important in relation to the text, itself an interpretant sign before becoming an interpreted sign of other interpretants in open ended reading and translating processes. The relation between the text and that to which it refers also presents itself in terms of similarity. What’s more, literary texts, indeed art texts in general are characterized by the fact that the relation of similarity is developed in terms of ‘picturing’ or ‘figuration,’ and not of imitation, representation, identification, or unification, that is, not as a mere copy, as we learn in particular with Bakhtin (see References; see also Petrilli and Ponzio 1999).

The relation between the translating text and its original is indirect, mediated, distanced. Translation requires the possibility of withdrawing, the possibility of a vision that is transgredient, in Bakhtinian sense, a relation of extralocalization. The architectonics of the self and the values connected with it are destabilized and replaced by the architectonics of the other, as Bakhtin would say (see 1993).

As reported discourse, translation resorts to a practice that all historical-natural languages are trained in, that is to say, reporting the discourse of others. Of course, not only is the *langue* involved in reported discourse, but also the *parole*. The individual *parole* is always more or less reported discourse in the form of imitation, stylization, parodization, direct or hidden controversy (according to all the modalities analyzed by Bakhtin in his two different editions of his monograph on Dostoevsky, the first published in 1929, the second in 1963). The presence of the word of the other in one’s own word, the fact that one’s own word must make its way through the intentions and the senses of the word of others favours the dialogic disposition of the translant word, and enhances the constitutive dialogism of the word, translated and translant. The inclination to respond to and report the discourse of others is structural to historical-natural language and to the utterance. This means to say that the disposition to respond to and report the word of others across historical-natural languages in the form of interlingual translation is already inscribed in speech, that is, in the linguistic functions and traditions that render speech possible. At the most, one of the major difficulties that the translator can encounter is that the utterance or the text in translation may belong to

a special language (sectorial or specialized) that he or she is not necessarily familiar with, or not sufficiently so. But this is not a different problem from that which emerges when a question of endolingual or intralingual translation. In any case, such difficulties do not justify supporting the principle of interlingual intranslatability, bearing in mind, however, the considerations we offer below.

As regards the translation of a literary text, above all a poetic text often evoked to support the claim that translation is impossible, we believe that the distanced and indirect character of the translantant word may be used to convalidate the thesis of translatability. From this point of view the argument may run as follows: the literary word and the translantant word relate to each other homologically, that is, on the basis of iconicity, in other words, they are related in terms of similarity not just at a surface level but at the level of formation and structure. Both the literary word and the translantant word can be distinguished from the word of primary or direct discourse genres (see Bakhtin 1979), that is, from the word that converges with the subject that produces it, with the subject's signifying intention. The literary word belongs to secondary or indirect discourse genres. As part of secondary genres, the literary word is no longer a direct word, one's own word, a word that identifies with the subject of discourse, as normally occurs in ordinary speech – or at least this is the claim. Instead, secondary genres evidence the indirect character of the word, the word with its shadow, to evoke Levinas. Here the word presents itself as an objectified word, a word that is pictured, and distanced from the self of discourse. The author does not identify with the literary word. On the contrary, the literary word, the word of secondary genres is other, such that whomever uses this word says 'I' without identifying with this pronoun. This occurs, for example, in the novel narrated in first person; in drama where the playwright makes his characters speak directly; even in lyrical poetry and in autobiography where a certain amount of distancing always intervenes between the writer and the I of discourse: 'extralocalization' (a Bakhtinian term) is the condition of literariness, of artistic discourse in general.

Translation is indirect discourse masked as direct discourse, all the same distanced from its author-translator. In fact, the translator says 'I' and nobody identifies him or her with the I of discourse, even when a question of oral and simultaneous translation. The Ambassador says: 'Thank you for the welcome, I am indeed honoured to be here'; and the interpreter translates: 'Grazie per l'accoglienza, sono davvero onorato di essere qui'; and nobody would dream of thinking that it is the interpreter who

is grateful or honoured. From this point of view and contrary to prejudice about the possibility of translating literary texts – especially a poetic text –, the capacity for exotopy, distancing, extralocalization, the iconic relation of similarity regulating translation as translation, somehow makes translation a privileged place for the orientation of discourse toward literariness. Such characteristics shared by the literary word and the translant word in fact render them less distant from each other than would be commonly expected.

But ‘translatability’ does not only signify the possibility of translation. It also denotes an open relation between a text in the original and its translation. As the general ‘interpretability’ of a text – with respect to which ‘translatability’ is a special case – translatability also indicates that the translation of a text remains open and never definitively resolved; that a translated text may continue to be translated, in fact may be translated over and over again, even in the same language into which it has already been translated, and eventually by the same translator, producing a potentially infinite number of translant texts. The sign materiality of that which is translated, its otherness and capacity for resistance with respect to any one interpretive trajectory, its complexity is evidenced by the inexhaustibility of the original in the texts that translate it. This meaning of the expression ‘translatability’ must also be taken into consideration when reflecting on the limits of translation, as in general of interpretation.

The problem of translatability must be faced in close relation with the problem of untranslatability, being two faces of the same process. Translatability, interpretability, expressibility of the untranslatable, of the uninterpretable, of the unexpressible. By virtue of semiotic materiality, the absolute otherness of signs, their capacity for resistance in the face of all attempts at interpretation-translation made upon them, the concept of translatability relates to the untranslatable, to that which cannot be englobed, which evades the limits of comprehensibility, the infinite with respect to the totality, in the finite, the unsayable with respect to the said of any linguistic system whatever, to that which cannot be possessed, the unconscious with respect to the conscious, the impossible. Language is the place of equivocation and misunderstanding and invents itself anew at every occurrence, the place where something fails, is left unsaid. The act of speech, assertion, statement necessarily implies leaving something out, something that escapes control of the will, that evades signifying intentionality, that cannot be exhausted in saying, absolute otherness, thereby generating new fluxes of interpretants which in turn resist control and evade the will, intention, purpose, consciousness,

authority of the ultimate word. Language as the condition of the unconscious. Language is not a nomenclature. If this were the case, translation across languages would be immediate in the sense that each word would have a corresponding concept in its own language and its immediate correlate in another language. But this is not the case. The relation is not between words and preconceived ideas, direct and unambiguous. To assert, to utter, to perform through words, through speech acts, means at once to repress, to remove, to silence – this is clearly revealed by such phenomena as dreaming, word play, artistic discourse, and symptoms.

If repression, removal, silence, the unsaid, the shadow, absolute otherness is the other face of the word, this has consequences upon the act of translation, as interlingual translation makes particularly evident. On the one hand, *mathesis universalis*, common speech, invariability, semiotic fluxes, synechism, energy, progress, succession, return, transitive writing, transcription, continuity; on the other hand, *mathesis singularis*, uniqueness, otherness, fragmentation, death, loss, intransitive writing, variability, unrepeatability, discontinuity. All these factors interact and overlap, evoking each other in uncertain, ambiguous relations of *chiaroscuro*, diffraction. An act of forgetfulness, oblivion, neglect, denial, a slip, omission, oversight, inadvertence shows how language is discord and not harmony, dissidence and not systems of opposite pairs. The self is not master in his/her 'own' home, the speaker is not at home in his/her 'own' mother-tongue, but is instead spoken by another language. The speaker, the self is nomadic. We are always 'strangers to ourselves' (Kristeva), such that what we share and have in common is the very condition of strangeness, absolute otherness. In the flux of infinite semiosis signs flourish in the dynamics of the interrelation between the logic of continuity and the logic of distinction, discretion, fragmentation, specification, absolute otherness, to evoke Bakhtin and Levinas. The relation of similarity among signs implies difference, dissimilarity, irreducible alterity. The relation between translating text and original text like the relation between reported discourse and original lives between centripetal forces and centrifugal forces operative in language, as Bakhtin says (1981: 272), between centralization and decentralization, monolingualism and plurilingualism, monologism and polylogism, identity and alterity, the same and the other, and also between translatability and untranslatability.

Through Valentin N. Voloshinov, author of *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, 1929 (see Voloshinov 1973), Bakhtin(-Voloshinov) conceptualizes communication and social intercourse in terms of dialectic and dialogic interaction

between identity and alterity, and introduces another two important categories in his analysis of verbal language, which may be extended to other sign systems as well: ‘theme’ (*smysl*) and ‘meaning’ (*znacenie*), or, if we prefer, ‘actual sense’ and ‘abstract sense’ (*Ibidem*: 106). The second term in these pairs covers all that is identical, reproducible and immediately recognizable each time the utterance is repeated — it concerns the meaning of linguistic elements, e.g. the phonemes and monemes constituting the utterance. ‘Meaning’ thus understood corresponds to signality rather than to signhood, to the ‘interpretant of identification,’ rather than to the ‘interpretant of answering comprehension,’ to ‘plain meaning,’ rather than to plurivocal meaning, to translation processes (and phases) where the degree of dialogism and distance regulating the connection between interpretant sign and interpreted sign is minimal. Instead, ‘theme’ refers to all that is original and unreproducible in an utterance, to overall sense, signifying import and evaluative orientation as these aspects emerge in a given instance of communicative interaction. ‘Theme’ accounts for communication and signifying processes in terms of answering comprehension, dialectic-dialogic response, and multiaccentuality.

It concerns translation-interpretation processes where dialogism prevails, such as to determine the capacity for qualitative leaps in knowledge and perception, amplifying the semantic polyvalency of discourse, and opening up to new ideological horizons: “Theme is a complex, dynamic system of signs that attempts to be adequate to a given instance of generative process. There is reaction by the consciousness in its generative process to the generative process of existence. Meaning is the technical apparatus for the implementation of theme” (*Ibidem*: 100)

Bakhtinian dialogics has made a very important contribution to translation theory and practice. It interrogates the literal interpretation of translation understood as transferral, transportation, shift of the text from one language to another, from one prison to another. The Bakhtinian concept of “answering comprehension” not only clarifies that to translate is to interpret, but also that translation involves dialogic procedure in which understanding also means to take a stance, to respond, to take responsibility. To translate is to recreate, to give life to the text, to contribute to its liberation from language, from contemporaneity, from free time. Translation is encounter among historical-natural languages, among special languages, among verbal and nonverbal signs, among ideologies and worldviews. Translation is joyous festivity involving signs and languages, whether close or distant, contexts, whether neighbouring or remote, where barriers as established by the belief in the distinction between

interlingual, endolingual and intersemiotic translation at last fall. Translation implies interpretation at the highest levels of dialogism, responsiveness, amorous and participative interpretation which most contributes to the text's resurrection, to its life in the great time.

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