

JULIUSZ DOMAŃSKI

THE BRIGHT AND THE DARK SIDES OF THE CULTURE OF TRANSLATION

Abstract: On parle ici non pas d'une culture de traduire, mais d'une telle culture littéraire qui devait son origine et ses qualités au fait que les traductions littéraires étaient pratiquées, qu'on traduisait d'une langue à une autre les œuvres littéraires écrites et qu'on les traduisait à l'écrit. Or, telle était dans l'Antiquité la seule culture littéraire latine qui, depuis la moitié du III^e siècle avant J.-C., se composait en grande partie des traductions du grec. Celles-ci pourtant n'étaient pas ce que sont les traductions d'aujourd'hui. En traduisant en latin les œuvres grecques, on les transformait plus ou moins, en en faisant des œuvres nouvelles: on en faisait les traductions qui étaient en même temps les imitations et les émulations propres. Rien de tel genre n'était connu dans la littérature antique grecque. Les Grecs qui se contentaient d'imiter leurs écrivains d'antan, Homère en premier lieu, ne faisaient les traductions des autres langues ni dans l'Antiquité, ni même à l'époque byzantine. La traduction de la Bible hébraïque au III^e siècle avant J.-C. devait son origine non pas aux Grecs, mais aux Juifs de la Diaspora qui ne comprenaient plus leur langue maternelle. Pour l'Occident latin, au contraire, la pratique littéraire des écrivains romains antiques est restée exemplaire et obligatoire: du Moyen-Âge à travers les siècles de la Renaissance jusqu'à l'époque moderne le paradigme antique romain de la traduction-imitation-émulation régnait non seulement dans les écrits latins de ces époques, mais aussi dans ceux composés en langues vernaculaires. Les écrivains de la Renaissance, latins et vernaculaires, y étaient extrêmement diligents, en traduisant les œuvres des auteurs anciens grecs en latin et leurs œuvres et à la fois les œuvres des auteurs latins en langues vernaculaires. De même que les écrivains latins antiques, ils pratiquaient eux aussi les traductions-imitations-émulations.

C'est en analysant, sous l'aspect de cette caractéristique générale, quelques exemples de la pratique des traducteurs romains – de Live-Andronique et de Catulle poètes, de Cicéron, traducteur à la fois de la poésie et de la prose grecques et en même temps théoricien de la traduction – que l'auteur de l'article essaye de caractériser les splendeurs et les ombres de ce qu'il appelle la culture de traduction.

Keywords: antiquity, Catullus, Cicero, culture of translation, *aemulatio*, Homer, *imitatio*, Livius andronicus, translation in ancient Greece, translation in ancient Rome, *Septuagint*

The term “culture of translation” should not be understood herein as relating to the outstanding features of an act of translation and its effects, but rather as a specific kind of culture that has developed owing to the very existence of translations. First and foremost, this concerns literary culture, but not exclusively so. We need to be aware of the fact that there may be, and indeed have been, cultures that have created their own magnificent literatures, in which literary translations did not play a significant role, as they are simply non-existent. We also need to know that the Ancient Greeks had a culture of this sort, self-generated and, initially, orally transmitted. Roman culture, on the other hand, took shape under the major influence of literary translations from the Greek, yielding a literature in which translation based on the notions of resemblance and competition, or *imitatio* and *aemulatio*, played a significant role. We are fully aware of both of these factors. Nevertheless, it is worth remembering a few more concrete facts and reflecting upon them in passing.

The Greeks did not translate the writings of the surrounding peoples into their own language, even though they took an avid interest in their lives and customs. Herodotus, for instance, had a great deal to say about the Persians, Medes, Phoenicians, and other neighbouring nations that preserved their thought in writing, but he does not quote excerpts from their works anywhere, invariably choosing to compose on his own fictional texts, such as the dialogues between his characters. Plato was fascinated by Egypt, its wisdom and antiquity. His interest is conspicuous in the opening conversation between Solon and an Egyptian priest in *Timaeus*, but the dialogue does not allow us to conclude that there were any translations of Egyptian writings made either earlier or during Plato’s lifetime. As this was a time period in Greece when writing had only started gaining the upper hand over orality as a mode of literary transmission, it might well be the oral character of the Greek culture that kept the literature of Greece’s neighbours from being translated in writing. Even the so-called *Septuagint*, i.e. the first Hebrew-Greek translation of the Bible from mid-third century BCE - a time when the originally oral literature had become dominated by the written medium – was not a Greek initiative, but the work of Hellenised Jews living in the Alexandrian diaspora.

The literary culture of pre-Classical Rome developed in a completely different manner, as Latin literature that has survived to this day begins with the translation of a Greek work. Even though there were some earlier Roman writings, whose scattered fragments are still known today, the Ancient Latin/Roman literature that we see as a stable and homogeneous cultural phenomenon started with the translation of Homer's *Odyssey* that was made in the latter half of the third century BCE, and was more or less contemporaneous with the Greek rendering of the first books of the Hebrew Bible.

The translator of the *Odyssey* was a Greek native to southern Italy, which for many years had been inhabited by a Hellenic population. He was a captive adopted, and then freed by the wealthy Livius family, and is therefore known as Livius Andronicus. At his Greek home he may have been a Greek grammarian, i.e. an expert in language and literature and an educator, and this is the function that he most probably served in the Roman family: it is assumed that he taught the Livius children Greek and read them Greek poetry. We do not know whether he translated the *Odyssey* on his own initiative or at his employers' request, but we do know that he did not stop there, writing dramatic works in Latin that were partly translations and partly adaptations of the Greek drama. Indigenous Romans followed in his footsteps. Early Roman literature is full of works in which plain translation blends with imitation and emulation. Such is the art of Plautus and Terence, but also of Ennius and Lucilius. Literature of the Ciceronian Period continued to develop along these lines, as did the literature of the Augustan Age. Long after the end of Antiquity this strategy became the hallmark of Western European literatures: translation always figures as a point of departure for further development.

When we speak of the translation of the *Odyssey*, what do we mean? The Latin version of Livius Andronicus' *Odyssey* is preserved in no more than twenty brief fragments, but they allow us to answer this seemingly nonsensical question, and to understand how an act of translation can lead to literary imitation and emulation. The initial verse of the *Odyssey*, preserved in its entirety in Livius Andronicus' translation, reads as follows:

Virum mihi, Caména, ínsece vérsutum,

as compared to the corresponding part of the original Homeric line:

Ándra moi énnepe, Músa, polýtropon.

Though we may not understand these verses, we immediately hear the difference in the rhythmic pattern. The Greek meter is the dactylic hexameter,

whereas the Latin meter is the “Saturnian verse” used by the old Roman poets before and sometime after Livius Andronicus’ lifetime. As we can see from this example, the translator did not strive to recreate the dactylic hexameter, but replaced the Greek meter with the existing Roman model. If we understand both languages, we are able to compare the semantics, which shows us two phenomena that seem mutually exclusive. The translator finds words and syntactic expressions that faithfully adhere to the Greek original. He carries out his task with maximum fidelity, and yet simultaneously feels free to exchange the Homeric realia into a Latin context. *Virum mihi insece versutum* is a faithful rendition of *Andra moi ennepe polytropon*, “the man of many devices” (Homer 1998: 13). Much like the meter, the addressee of these words has changed: in the Latin version the Greek Muse is replaced by the Latin Camena. In our view of translation this is essentially a calque, but at the same time an utter “Latinisation” of Homer, achieved through rendering his poetry into the native Latin verse and a change of addressee: it does, however, move us closer to literary imitation and emulation than to translation proper.

In this brief study it is impossible to demonstrate exactly how translatorial procedures transformed into their cognates, imitation and emulation, turning into one receptive-imitative and emulative-creative process, visible in the works of both Roman poets and prose-writers. It would be relatively easy to illustrate the transformation on the basis of brief poetic texts, but even this would be done at the cost of a detailed analysis, which would demand much more space than we have at present. Let us try to outline the matter at hand succinctly and symbolically, as it is, taking the example of a lyric poem by Gaius Valerius Catullus that starts with the line *Ille mi par esse deo videtur*. This is often described as a translation of a lyric poem by Sappho which begins with identical words: *Fainetai moi kēinos isos theoisin*. It is undoubtedly a translation, very faithful in many details, but in others, which I will not list here, it strays from its model. Both texts provide a precise description of the physiological symptoms of a female feeling, which are strong but hard to describe unequivocally, at the sight of the casual and composed behaviour of another woman in the company of a man that the speaker fancies. This feeling is most probably envy, but it may also be fascination. Sappho’s poem, preserved only as a part of one, concluding stanza, ends with what we may only guess to be an expression of resignation and acceptance of the situation. Catullus’ poem concludes with a stanza that is the author’s warning against *otium*, idleness, i.e. time

not spent on the masculine, public activities of Romans in the Republican era, such as those of a statesman, lawyer, soldier, a peasant or a farmer. By introducing this Roman social and cultural notion and describing its deplorable consequences, which were surely absent from the missing stanza by Sappho, Catullus established a solid bond between translation and emulation. Such non/translations are manifold in Roman literature, and there are still more unrestrained imitations of Greek writings. I pass over them and return for a moment to what can be classified as translation proper, virtually free from imitative-emulative devices.

We may count some works by Cicero as translation proper. Not all of them, however, as it would be difficult to classify as such his renderings of brief excerpts from Plato's writings, which were inserted into Cicero's dialogues as quotes, often rather arbitrarily cut, and stylised to a greater or lesser degree. Furthermore, the translation of Aratos of Soloi's astronomical and meteorological poem *Phaenomena* may be considered translation proper according to our standards, but such an acknowledgement is problematised by frequent textual ornaments and embellishments added by Cicero himself. Still, it seems that we can count two thematically connected Greek speeches by Aeschines and Demosthenes, which Cicero sought to function without any secondary goal. The translations themselves are lost, and therefore we are not able to use them as a measure of Cicero's pure translation art. There is one piece of precious evidence, however, that remains of his translation work: Cicero's commentary describing and accounting for his own translatorial technique, which provides a mini-treatise on the art of translation. The description and the justification of his translation work are surprisingly succinct:

And I did not translate them as an interpreter but as an orator, keeping the same ideas and the forms, or as one might say, the "figures" of thought, but in language which conforms to our usage. And in so doing, I did not hold it necessary to render word for word, but I preserved the general style and force of the language. For I did not think I ought to count them out to the reader like coins, but to pay them by weight, as it were" (Cicero 1949: 365)

The quintessence of Cicero's claim can be reduced to the following pithy statement: in Cicero's view the unit of translation is not the quantitative equivalence of individual words, but a sentence as a vehicle of both meaning and the literary and linguistic form.

This principle went against the grain of an earlier practice of which Cicero may well have been ignorant, one that developed in the context of the Greek language. It was connected with the above-mentioned translation of the Hebrew Bible, undertaken around mid-way through the third century BCE and finished two hundred years later. It relied on the sameness of words, on the meticulous preservation of every single lexeme in the translation and, perhaps most importantly, on copying the phraseology and syntax. This is not something that Cicero mentions openly in the quote, but his own translations prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that such translation practice was alien to him. The further history of the theory and practice of translation from Greek to Latin, both in Antiquity and afterwards, followed these twin poles. The translation ideal of Cicero from the late fourth century was popularised amongst Latin Christians by St. Jerome in his epistolary treatise on the best method of translation, *De optimo genere interpretandi*. Here he excludes the Bible from Cicero's almost verbatim translation rule, postulating the very literalness that both Cicero and himself opposed in all other works. However, this rule that St. Jerome reserved solely for the Bible was expanded upon and applied in other writings. This was the mode in which Aristotle was translated into Latin in the Middle Ages, and there were many theorists and practitioners of Greek to Latin translation, such as the Greek scholar Burgundio of Pisa, for whom any departure from lexical literalness moved translation into the spheres of imitation and emulation, as practised by the poets of ancient Rome.

We need to become deeply aware of the consequences that the procedures outlined in this study had for the literary (and overall) culture of Latinised Western Europe. From Antiquity onwards this culture became a synthesis, an almost inseparable fusion of Greek and Roman elements, turning into one Greco-Roman culture. This synthesis joined and overlapped with another, biblical, Judeo-Christian tradition, which, through translation, introduced into it a whole new world of content and forms in yet another language and yet another culture: Hebrew. As such, it endured, becoming a model that the post-Antiquity Western world imitated for centuries. In all truthfulness, imitation was indeed the distinguishing feature of Ancient Greek culture: until the end of the ancient civilisation it fed upon its own literary tradition, Homer and Plato, classical playwrights and the Attic orators of the fourth century BCE, but it all remained within the bounds of its own linguistically homogeneous tradition. It is true that it was gradually infiltrated by the world of the true content and the Biblical forms of language,

and that this happened at the dawn of Christianity, owing to the work of such people as Philo of Alexandria, a diasporic Jew who did not know his native tongue and read the Bible in Greek, “translating” its realia into the terms of the Greek philosophy in his commentaries. Still, this was all done within the bounds of one culture and within the limits of the Greek language. This is more or less the model of a monolingual culture that Ancient Greece handed down to medieval Byzantium, which took no avid interest in what was created in Latin in Western Europe, and therefore undertook the task of Latin translation only very occasionally.

What can be said about these two translation models today? How to valorise them as they stand in mutual relation? In particular, how to valorise the Western culture of translation? The modern era appreciated novelty and uniqueness, and accordingly, the originality of the autogeneous Greek culture was heralded as superior to the translation-oriented and imitative Roman model. The rebirth of Hellenism was extolled as a revival of originality at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The Middle Ages and its dual renaissances of the ninth and twelfth centuries had very limited first-hand access to authentic Greek heritage, as it was known first and foremost from the Latin adaptations. Therefore, essentially what it knew was the synthesis of the ancient Greco-Roman culture of translation-imitation-emulation. It was only the great Renaissance of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries that gradually opened to the authentic Greek culture, repeatedly and declaratively asserting its supremacy over Latin, for all its antiquity, chronological anteriority and archetypal character, as it generally preferred the old over the new and the original over the derivative. Such was, for example, the opinion of Erasmus of Rotterdam, when he attempted to pass judgement on Christian cultural traditions. This in no way means that he actually departed from the Roman cultural model, or that he created a culture differing from the Greco-Roman synthesis of the Ancient Romans. On the contrary, Erasmus used the same procedures, translating Ancient Greek writings into Latin, both Greek and Latin works into the vernacular, and imitating both Greek and Roman poets in his own poetry, which he consciously made similar and dissimilar to the originals. He wished not only to imitate, but also to emulate his models, just as the imitators and emulators of Greeks did in Ancient Rome.

We ourselves, to a large extent the heirs of Romanticism, spontaneously tend to favour whatever is archetypal, self-generated and original, and therefore we favour Greece over Rome just as our ancestors did at the

turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. But does this valorising perspective make any sense at all? Does it not resemble a mock debate on the superiority of Christmas over Easter? Perhaps it will suffice to speak of the very difference of the cultural mode and realise that, without the original, self-generated Greek culture, there indeed would be no Roman culture of translation-imitation-emulation, as I call it. But there is more: Roman culture would not have taken such shape without the initial willingness to be open to the other. It was exactly this willingness that created the model of the post-Ancient European culture in medieval, early modern and modern times. If the dark side of this tradition is its derivativeness, its bright side is in the fact that it became a model of openness and novelty created on the basis of both of these approaches. Ancient Greece (and here I am repeating a *bon mot* of the highest order) remains for contemporary Europe a venerable and indispensable treasury, but a model for how to use this treasury is found in Ancient Rome: and this, in my view, is the highly commendable and equally indispensable bright side of what I have called the culture of translation.

trans. Anna Kowalcze-Pawlik

Bibliography

- Cicero, M.T. 1949. *De Invention. De Optimo Genere Oratorum. Topica*. Ed. and trans. H.M. Hubbell. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP.
- Homer, 1998. *Odyssey*. Ed. and trans. A.T. Murray, rev. E. Dimock. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP.